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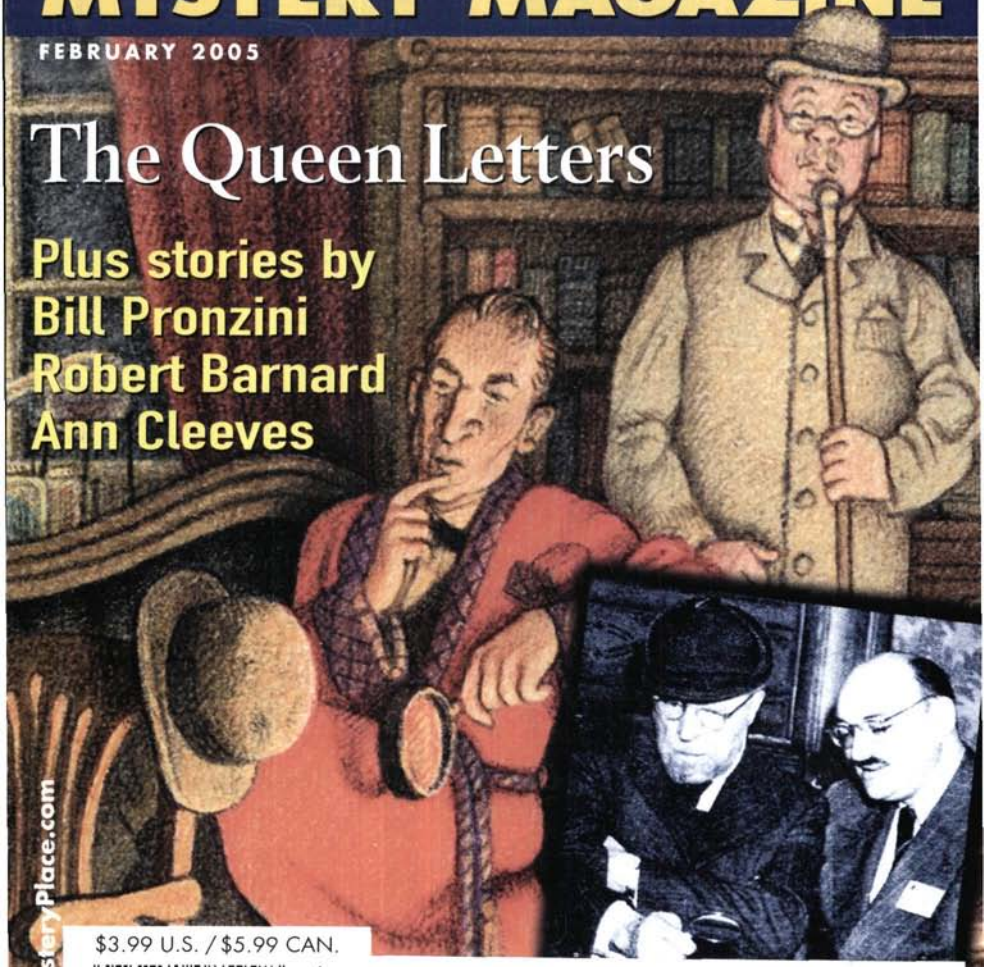

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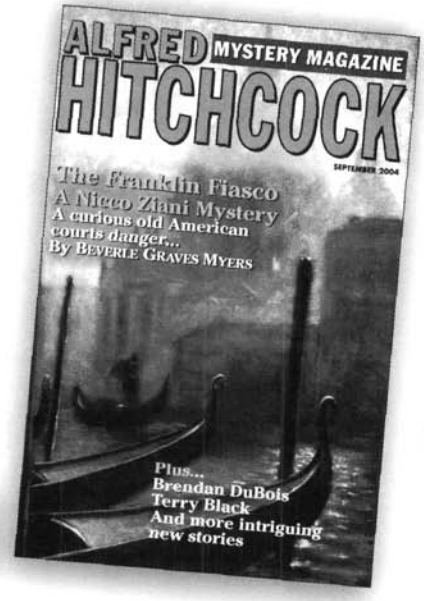

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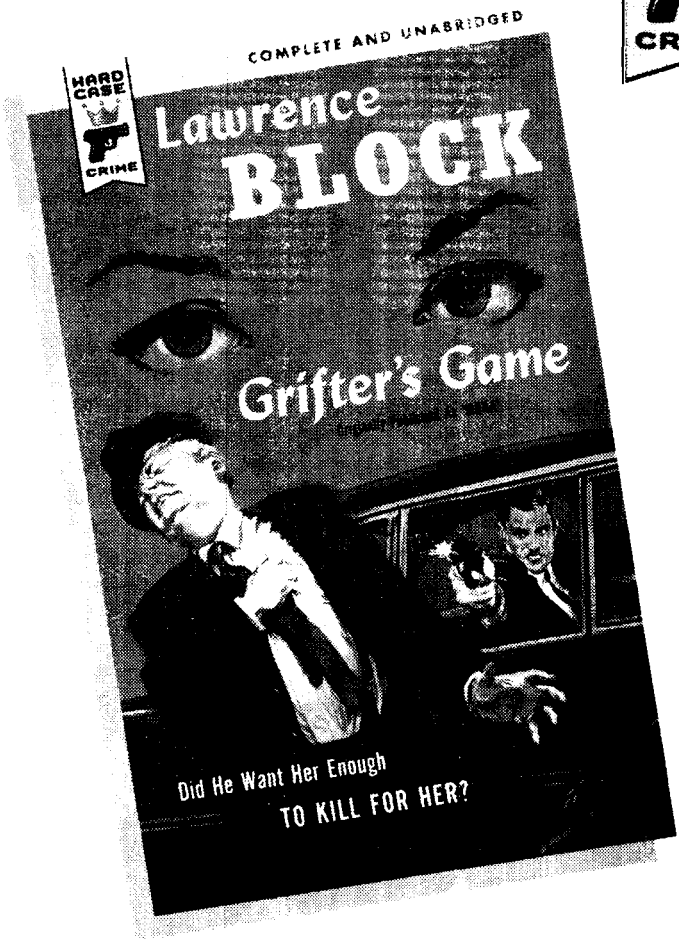

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Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, a.k.a. Ellery Queen, were both born in 1905. For their centenary year, we've commissioned several commemorative articles. Here, for the first time, are revealing excerpts from their correspondence.

The Queen Letters

by Jon L. Breen

In Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library repose the papers of Frederic Dannay, an archival treasure trove for researchers on twentieth-century mystery and detective fiction. Several years ago, preparing a proposal for a biography of the Ellery Queen team of Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, I perused a few of the boxes of letters, manuscripts, contracts, income tax returns, and other documents. They held a wealth of information and insights on the history of *EQMM* and on a remarkably successful but frequently combative partnership.

Virtually every contributor to *EQMM* between its founding in 1941 and Fred Dannay's death in 1982 is represented by letters in the archive, as are luminaries outside the field: Lillian Hellman, W. Somerset Maugham, Norman Rockwell, Eleanor Roosevelt, John Updike. But of greatest interest are the letters the Queen collaborators wrote to each other about various aspects of their personal lives and professional association: long, impassioned, sometimes exaggerated (one hopes), and often painfully frank.

Some letters reveal the personalities, peculiarities, and gripes of *EQMM* contributors. C. Daly King (May 15, 1943) bites the editorial hand that feeds him, grousing about low payment, opining that the Queen name shouldn't be on the magazine because it is "only occasionally pure detection," and expressing dislike of Simenon, "the 'hardboiled' crap," and "probably the worst of the lot . . . the Queen [radio] scripts." Phyllis Bentley (February 5, 1954) complains about a cover "which bears no relation whatever to the stories within" and displays "so much naked femininity that one really hardly likes to be seen with the magazine in one's hand." (In the 1950s, the magazine adopted a special subscribers' cover in response to reader complaints about the newsstand version.)

Other letters show Queen the creative editor. Manly Wade Wellman (June 10, 1945) credits Dannay with "once ask[ing] me to do a story for you about an Indian detective." Wellman's "A Star for a Warrior" (*EQMM*, April, 1946), which anticipated Tony Hillerman by several decades, won the magazine's first annual prize contest. Charlotte Armstrong (August 17, 1950) is not sure "The Enemy" (May, 1951) is a better title than "Before Dark" for her first-prize winner but will go with it if Fred, whose title-changing proclivity was legend, likes it.

The relationship of mystery writer and critic Anthony Boucher to

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the Queen team and to *EQMM* is a saga in itself. In the 1940s, the multilingual Boucher translated stories from French and Spanish (including the first appearance in English of Jorge Luis Borges), referring (February 2, 1944) to the possibility of becoming "officially foreign language editor of *EQMM,* with a small salary." (Boucher would undoubtedly be delighted with the magazine's current Passport to Crime feature.) In 1949, he succeeded Howard Haycraft as author of the "Speaking of Crime" book-review column, and he contributed the "Best Mysteries of the Month" column in 1950 and from 1957 to his death in 1968.

As I can personally attest, Dannay gave a free hand to his book-review columnists, never interfering with their honest judgments. Dannay alerts Lee (November 1, 1948) that Boucher will give *Ten Days' Wonder* a bad notice in *EQMM*: "He . . . disliked the book enormously (I think it offended his deep sense of religiousness and theological purity, though he won't admit it). . . . [He] asked me what he should do about reviewing [it]. . . . Did Boucher expect me to say: Give the Queen book a good review or else. Did he even expect me to say: Forget the book rather than pan it. If Boucher expected this, he has a low opinion of me indeed, and no understanding of me at all. I told Boucher that the review column was his, without strings. . . . I told Boucher to write what he damned please. I admit I don't like it, that it was actually a supreme insult on Boucher's part even to ask me what he should do about reviewing the book—especially when I tell you that he asked me not privately but with [John Dickson] Carr present."

Fine as *EQMM* was throughout the 'forties and thereafter, editing it was not always unalloyed joy. Dannay to Lee (May 5, 1949): "[E]diting *EQMM*... is a colossal headache. . . . If I have trouble with [publisher Lawrence] Spivak, in the coming showdown, I may phone you and tell you I've had enough of a long, grueling, heartbreaking, thankless job—and suggest that we all do what is our eventual fate in all endeavors—pull out and let them use the name." Happily, that never happened, but the stress continued. Dannay to Boucher (February 7, 1963): " . . . [I]t is so hard to keep up the basic quality—the boys and girls have virtually given up the short story. I am at my wits' end for the future (beginning 1964!)."

Although Dannay was always the principal editor of *EQMM,* Lee was never completely without a role and under their contract would have stepped in as editor, should anything happen to Fred. (During World War II, there was brief concern that Dannay—in his late thirties, in dicey health, and married with two sons—might be drafted!) In a series of undated letters to Dannay during the 'forties, Lee notes that he put in considerable work on the magazine but cannot take on half the editorial duties. Recalling an earlier disagreement about whether the famous Queen collection of detective short stories should be housed in Dannay's home or in their office, Manny says he feels

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Fred has a proprietary interest in the collecting and editorial duties he wishes to maintain. In addition to his cut based on the Queen name, Lee wants some recompense for his efforts on the magazine and resents the fact that stories for reprint are being "garnered and winnowed out by a paid employee, [former *Black Mask* editor Joseph T.] Shaw (half of whose salary I have been paying!)." Lee believes he did enough work for a thirty-percent share of the seminal anthology *101 Years' Entertainment* (1941), about a third for the first twelve issues of *EQMM,* twenty percent thereafter. When managing editor Robert P. Mills sends Lee some manuscripts to consider, Fred (March 18, 1950) has to reassure Manny he is not "working editorially in a position of subordination to Mills. . . ." One telling document is a note to Mills from Lee about an unnamed first story he wants to reject, with a penciled note from Dannay accepting it and offering $125 plus entry in the annual contest.

Lee's resentment of Dannay's separate identity as Queen the editor came to a head when Fred began the introduction to the anthology *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1944) with a boyhood reminiscence as "one of the Queens," a decision Fred saw as innocuous but Manny thought a betrayal of the partnership. Lee to Dannay (undated): "Nothing has changed by this event; matters have rather clarified. Slowly but surely the nebulous substance of our fundamental conflict is clotting into recognizable shape. I am being driven by events, by myself, by you, into a corner. If parts of this letter seem less than cohesive, it's because the trapped animal rarely has the capacity to sit down and 'reason things out' coolly. He blunders on toward his fate." In a later letter, he expands on his perceived "degeneration" as part of the team: " . . . [W]hereas once I stood in a position of relative equality to you, in the eyes of both of us as in the eyes of the world, I have gradually assumed a more and more inferior position, and that process, as I said above, is only accelerating."

For a long time, the working processes of the Ellery Queen team were a secret. When asked by interviewers, the cousins would reply that they had tried every possible method of collaboration before hitting on the one that worked for them, but they declined to state what that method was. Francis M. Nevins's critical study *Royal Bloodline* (1974) was probably the first printed source to spell it out: the novels, stories, and (in the beginning) radio scripts were outlined in detail by Dannay, expanded into finished form by Lee.

Lee to Dannay (undated, probably early or mid 1940s) on the importance of this division of labor: "I will never be able to do the kind of thing you do in plot—not half as well. But on the other hand, I don't think you will ever be able to do the kind of thing I do in writing . . . not half as well. The two, together—the peculiar plots, the characteristic writing—have made Queen. And if you think those plots with your writing or anybody else's writing make Queen, you're mistaken. Just as my writing with my plots or anybody else's

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plots would make, not Queen, but something else entirely."

Just how difficult and combative the collaboration could be is illustrated by a series of letters from the late 1940s, when Dannay was living in New York and Lee in Southern California.

Dannay to Lee (October 18, 1947), forwarding a 59-page outline for *Ten Days' Wonder*: "It represents, after the abandonment of my first attempt, two months of solid, grueling work, with the fluorescent lights in my study on many a night. I hit a peak one night by working until three A.M. I've reached the point where I've got a bellyful of *Ten Days' Wonder*, and will be glad to see it out of my hands and into yours. I hope you like it. . . . Bear in mind, this is the first sustained full-length job I've done in a long time, and I did it under harrowing circumstances—ill health, rustiness, self-doubts."

Dannay to Lee (October 24) notes Lee's lack of "real enthusiasm for the job" as expressed in a subsequent phone conversation, during which Manny apparently requested a revised outline, on which Fred hadn't the time to work. "From past experience, especially on novels, we both know how time fritters away. The days become weeks, the weeks become months, and the months become many months. I am terribly disturbed at the prospect of history repeating itself: that is, with an outline finished, seeing it simply lie around indefinitely, either because I can't get to doing it over from an alternate viewpoint, or because you can't fit it into your own schedule of work. I don't have to tell you how very possible this is." Fred notes that if he has to do a new version and the novel is not completed, 1948 might be "the first year that something signed by Queen has not appeared." He goes on to reply to some of Manny's objections, including a reference to "Ellery's last case." Fred sees the novel as "in part an exposure of detective stories and of fictional detectives; even more relevant and important, it is an exposure of Ellery, as a character and as a detective. The exposure is complete and devastating, with the satirical finish that in the end he is still right. But in the process of exposure, and as a result of it, Ellery should emerge as a human being. In my opinion the only logical conclusion of the total exposure of Ellery's fallibility and 'brilliance' is that he give up detection. Hence, his last case." *Ten Days' Wonder* would be completed and published in time to save 1948 from being a Queenless year.

Dannay to Lee (June 24, 1948) on his outline-in-progress for the book that will become *Cat of Many Tails*: "You will remember that we both arrived simultaneously to the conclusion that the next Queen novel should be 'straighter'—or as you put it, 'less grandiose.' It was a good sign that we both felt that way independently. I have tried to do a straighter type of story—but, I hasten to say, *without sacrificing everything of the Queen hallmark*. . . . Ellery remains Ellery . . . but he is under an unusual emotional stress (not love) and this gives him a definitely human role to play. . . . [I]t would be wise indeed for both of us to take stock most carefully and most thor-

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oughly at this time. We both have the feeling that a lifetime's work, in all fields, is sort of crumbling around us. . . . [W]e can't suddenly transform Ellery into the Fat Man, or the Thin Man, or Mr. D.A., or Perry Mason. We've got to maintain the *basic purity* of Ellery—with those modifications which 1948 demands." Subsequent exchanges must have been less agreeable. Dannay to Lee (July 2, 1948), accompanying the outline: "[I]f you should happen to dislike the new novel intensely, then send back the whole f***ing outline to me, and that's that. All that will be lost will be my time, my work, and my health."

As is clear by now, each partner sometimes felt underestimated or ill-used by the other.

Dannay to Lee (July 2, 1948): "Manny, you are emotionally, physically, and mentally incapable of taking criticism. You fight criticism with an absolute fury. Yet, you are not averse to dishing it out. You have let me have it many times in the past, and without mercy; I have learned to take it from you the hard way—by being physically, emotionally, and mentally ill from the things you have said to me. You have even rubbed it in the double-strength method—giving me favorable criticism first and then later confessing that you had not told me your true feelings, and then giving it to me in virtual annihilation doses. . . . In quite a few of your letters to me, since you moved to Hollywood, you have pointed out how much you have grown up, how much you have learned. In this last letter of yours you say: 'One thing I've learned is to stand on my own feet.' That sounds like a threat. Is that what it's meant to be? If so, what the hell do you have in mind? . . . I cannot tell you how low I feel right now—about everything connected with Queen. We seem farther apart in understanding than ever before, and the geographical separation—forcing us to resort to long, involved, and perpetually misunderstood letters—emphasizes the futility and despair in my mind. I approach each new problem with waning confidence, with increasing fears, with devastating doubt."

Lee to Dannay (Saturday, April 23 [1949?]): "Danny, what is your beef? What's eating you? Your letters are poisonous. You keep dropping little atom bombs under me. Why? Do you realize how suspicious you are? How you always assume there is a 'hidden motive' in everything I say? How goddam touchy you are in everything? What nasty slaps you throw my way at every conceivable opportunity?"

Dannay to Lee (May 5, 1949): "I don't doubt that you credit me with a certain creative ingenuity, what you call a 'peculiar talent,' but when it comes to deeper critical convictions, to larger literary and creative knowledge and feelings, I'm afraid you rank me rather low. I have a certain brilliance in plot construction and conception, but I have the feeling you consider this a rather superficial accomplishment—that when it comes to the more important verities and philosophies of writing, I am just a clever contriver."

Lee to Dannay (December 1, 1949): "So endeth another chapter in

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'the most successful collaboration in literary history,' on triumphant notes of sour grapes and bitter recriminations tooted by both parties. We are only half a step away from Gilbert and Sullivan. I don't know but that they solved their problems more sensibly. There can be little reasonableness in communication of feelings or ideas when both are chronically poisoned. You look for antidotes in vain."

Over the years other writers, sometimes third collaborators and sometimes full-blown ghostwriters, lurked behind the Ellery Queen byline. Their use of ghosts, which has regrettably tarnished the team's reputation somewhat, has been both misunderstood and exaggerated. The novels and short stories in which Ellery the detective appears, plus those adult hardcover originals in which he does *not* appear, were written from Dannay's outlines and, apart from a few books in the 1960s, were completed by Lee. Where a third collaborator (Theodore Sturgeon, Avram Davidson, or Paul W. Fairman) was brought in, the final manuscript was revised and edited by both partners. The single exception was the short story "The Reindeer Clue," written by Edward D. Hoch after the death of Lee and edited by Dannay.

Juveniles were another matter. The Ellery Queen, Jr., books, with their color/animal title pattern (beginning with *The Black Dog Mystery* in 1941 and ending with *The Purple Bird Mystery* in 1966) and small-town boy detective named after the Queen houseboy Djuna, were very Queenian in approach, but Dannay and Lee did not write them. At one point, the writer hired to ghost these juveniles raised the ire of Manny by employing a sub-ghost. Lee to Dannay (Friday, Nov. 12 [1948?]): "It's hard for me to believe that a contract for ghost services covers the ghost being ghosted! . . . He's been getting a good financial deal on the basis of his services, and his services aren't to act as an agent, but as a writer. . . . We didn't give him fifty percent because he had to pay off another ghost! . . . I say we ought to make a deal with the man who's writing the books—yes, even if we have to pay him fifty p.c.!" Lee to Dannay (December 31, 1949): That "a book bearing the Queen imprint [*The White Elephant Mystery*] is to be published February 23d—less than two months away—which neither of us has ever seen, been told, or heard of from or through any agency whatever . . . comes to me as the most shocking news of the last twenty-one years. It may be 'okay with' you, but it isn't with me. . . . [I]t seems mandatory to me that a test case be made of this, a very strong protest lodged, and a demand for immediate turning over of the manuscript or galleys for one or the other, or both, of our approval. As a matter of fact, there can be no question that this is a fundamental breach of contract . . . as our prior approval is a condition of any publication."

The possibility of training a stable of ghosts to work on adult mystery fiction was contemplated surprisingly early. Dannay to Lee (March 9, 1950) on a new contract under consideration: "As to

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what is contemplated in setting up a group of writers—at this stage, your guess is as good as mine. Salary or royalties?—I don't know; where to find them—that would be our job, along with the training and overseeing. . . ." Fred notes the job would be difficult, "BUT YOU'LL BE DOING THAT HARD WORK WITH TWENTY YEARS OF FINANCIAL SECURITY AHEAD OF YOU—if the deal goes through." That deal didn't, but a decade later, another one did.

With *Dead Man's Tale* (1961), paperback original novels began to appear under the Queen name, edited by Lee but written by such pros as Stephen Marlowe, Richard Deming, Fletcher Flora, Talmage Powell, Jack Vance, Henry Kane, Charles Runyon, and Walt Sheldon. The last of them was *The Blue Movie Murders* (1973), written by Edward D. Hoch and edited by Dannay. With the exception of Hoch's novel and a few others, these works were not distinctively Queenian in flavor. When they began to appear, it was easy for savvy American readers to keep them separate in their minds from the "real" Queen novels by virtue of their format. But in Great Britain, they were first published in hardcover, adding to the confusion. Victor Gollancz to Dannay (November 18, 1959): " . . . [T]he real 'Ellery Queen' has, so to say, professionally vanished, whether or not I continue to publish the official 'Ellery Queen.' . . . I cannot help feeling some qualms over the moral and possibly (over here, though doubtless not in America) legal aspect of the matter." With the release of the ghostwritten novels, the field's leading critic, a friend to both partners, was again in a quandary. Boucher to Dannay (October 4, 1963), warning of a coming pan in the *New York Times Book Review*, cites "a certain obligation to my readers—also, more selfishly, to my own reputation."

Beyond the ghostwriting controversy, beyond the personal and professional skirmishing, the Dannay papers illuminate the unique contribution both partners made to the twentieth-century detective story. Any brief sampling of the Dannay-Lee letters risks giving a distorted impression of two incompatible souls who were forced by their success to continue working together despite mutual dislike. The full picture is much different. Between the potshots, the two cousins expressed genuine love and concern for each other and their respective families, described intimate details of their health problems and internal struggles, and offered personal advice and comfort in times of trial, which were many for both of them.

Lee to Dannay (undated, in the days following Dannay's serious traffic accident in 1940) lists "people who called or wrote or otherwise expressed concern about you during your stay at the Hospital" and goes on to write, "Take care of yourself and leave everything to me. From now on I shan't make important decisions without getting your okay, but I don't want you to sit and fret about details; you can do yourself and me the greatest amount of good by nursing yourself back to health in a determined campaign of recuperation." (continued p.63)

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GUSTAV AMLINGMEYER, HOLMES OF THE RANGE

by Steve Hockensmith

Harper's Weekly
Harper & Bros., Publishers
325 to 337 Pearl Street
Franklin Square
New York

Greetings to whichever Harper I have the pleasure of addressing!

First off, let me slather on a bit of butter by telling you how much I appreciate your family's fine magazine. Out here in Montana, a person can get to thinking the world isn't anything but grass, sky, and cow pies. *Harper's Weekly* is one of the ways we Westerners remind ourselves that there's still a thing called "civilization" out there and that supposedly we are a part of it. That's

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an important idea for folks to keep a rope on, I can assure you, for I've been to a few places where they didn't, and it was almost enough to get me believing all that science talk about men being nothing more than monkeys who traded in their tails for trousers.

As much as I admire your publication, however, I do have a notion as to how it could be improved. It has come to my attention in recent months that there are two kinds of stories much in demand by the reading public: yarns about cowboys and yarns about detectives. I know about the first because, until a few weeks back, I was a working cowpuncher myself. Many's the time I've pulled out a copy of *Buffalo Bill Stories* or *Deadwood Dick Library* and tickled the boys in the bunkhouse by reading out the most outlandish bits of balderdash contained therein. Detective tales, on the other hand, I never troubled myself with until only recently, when my brother got himself a craving for them worse than a rummy craves rotgut. In the past two months, he's read dozens of the damned things—or, to be more accurate, he's *heard* dozens of them, because I do all the reading, my brother having discontinued his schooling before he could discover what follows A, B, and C.

Sherlock Holmes has fictional fans as well as real-life devotees such as the members of the BSI, whom we are honoring this issue. Steve Hockensmith's Old Red is a fine example. The sleuthing cowboy has practically memorized every Holmes story he can get his hands on. Old Red is soon to start appearing in a series of novels from St. Martin's Minotaur. Look for *Holmes on the Range* in early 2006.

It occurs to me that cowboys being popular and detectives being popular, a cowboy detective would be twice as popular as each. And I just happen to know one, for there are lessons to be learned from detective yarns, and my brother has put them to use. An account of how he's done so is what fills the next few pages—pages that I propose you reprint in *Harper's Weekly* under the title "Gustav Amlingmeyer, Holmes of the Range." (If that title is not to your liking, feel free to brand it with another. I'm also rather partial to "Old Red's Deadly Dilemma" myself.)

Gustav Amlingmeyer, as you might have guessed, is my brother, although those who know him by his Christian name are few and far between. It's much more common to hear him hailed by the handle "Old Red." This he earned both for his sunset-red head of hair and his midnight-black disposition. My name is Otto Amlingmeyer, though I've been rechristened "Big Red" because I've got the same hair as my elder brother but about a foot more of spine and leg beneath it.

It was only natural that Old Red and I should become cowboys,

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as we grew up with ample supplies of the profession's two most important requirements: poverty and desperation. Though droving is hardly the best way to go about ridding yourself of either, somehow we've managed to build up a small stake—though Old Red might argue with that "we." Like many a hand, I'm a man who likes to cut his wolf loose at the end of a trail, and no doubt wine, women, and song would claim every penny if the purse-strings were mine alone to draw tight or pull open. Gustav, on the other hand, manages to keep his wolf hogtied at all times, and he's insisted on squirreling away almost all of our pay.

"Pushin' other men's cows ain't gonna get us nowhere," he would tell me when I fussed over this. "We gotta save up and buy somethin' of our own if we wanna end up anything more than a couple of saddle bums."

I always assumed that the "something of our own" Gustav talked about would be a little ranch or farm somewhere. So you can imagine my dismay when my brother informed me we were going into the restauranting business. I was in a saloon here in Billings at the time, and though I was the one doing the drinking, I asked Old Red whether he was drunk or crazy, for surely it had to be one or the other.

"Nothin' crazy about cookin' for folks, little brother," he said. "People always need food."

I didn't bother asking him if he was joking, seeing as how he cracked a funny about as often as a coyote yodels "Onward, Christian Soldiers." "How much?" I asked instead.

"Two hundred."

That was nearly half what we had saved. I yelled out to the bartender to bring me some of his best whiskey, pronto, as soon enough I would not be able to afford it. Once the first shot was tickling my liver, I nodded at Old Red.

"All right," I said. "I'm ready. Tell me the rest."

And that he did. It seems he'd bumped into a fellow name of Starchy Baker who'd been one of the belly cheaters on a big West Texas roundup Gustav had ridden in '88. Starchy had tired of doing all his cooking out of the back of a chuck wagon, so he'd traded in his dutch oven for the real thing. He had himself a little lunch counter out near the stockyards, and there were always enough outfits coming through to keep his griddles hot. Only Starchy couldn't hardly keep up anymore on account of the rheumatoid arthritis that had driven him off the trail in the first place. It was getting worse now, and Starchy figured he needed a long soak in the Arkansas hot springs to uncurl his boogered-up bones.

"So you bought him out for two hundred dollars."

"He wanted three at first," Old Red said. "I haggled him down pretty good."

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I tossed back another gulp of tonsil varnish. "We'll just see about that."

We walked out to the edge of town and Gustav showed me what two hundred dollars could buy a man in Billings: a rotting shack, twenty rickety chairs, a couple wobbly tables, and an ancient cast-iron stove.

"It ain't the looks that count. It's the location," Gustav said, probably just blowing back at me something Starchy had said to him.

"Well, let's not forget another little certain something there, brother," I replied. "How about the damn *food!* You can hardly tell salt from pepper, and the last time I tried fixin' up any grub I nearly killed six men and a dog."

Now my brother's temper is a strange and unpredictable creature. Some days he might snarl at you for pouring your coffee too loud, other days you could tie the ends of his moustache together and he wouldn't say boo. This happened to be one of the latter kind of days, for he didn't take to screaming back at me or even raise his voice.

"You and me, we won't have to so much as crack an egg," he said. "Starchy had him an Irish gal that filled in from time to time. There's no reason we couldn't hire her on to do all the cookin'. All we'd have to do is take the orders, tote the food, and tally up the money."

That took some of the bite out of me. Old Red had thought it through fine enough. Still, I felt pretty strange about trading in my chaps for an apron.

"What do you say we fire up that oven and just shovel the rest of our money straight in?" I said. But Gustav was still feeling charitable, and he didn't take the bait.

Two days later, Starchy cleared out his gear, said his goodbyes, and left us to it. At last, the Amlingmeyer boys were respectable businessmen. Or at least we were as respectable as you can be when you're running around in a greasy apron fetching beans and bacon for cowboys. We had other customers, too—railroad men, soldiers, drifters who'd come into a charity nickel. We certainly weren't catering to the town's leading citizens, but Gustav and I didn't mind as long as folks paid for their food and ate it without getting into a fight.

Our clientele coming from the rougher classes, we did have a tussle on our hands every so often. Some Texas drover would get salty with a buffalo soldier, hot words would lead to flying fists, and lickety-split, grown men would be poking each other with forks and trying to spoon each other's eyes out. Now as I've got an uncommon amount of flesh to bring to bear, it at first fell to me to settle any dust-ups. But we quickly learned that imposing size was a less reliable peacemaker than questionable sanity. If I couldn't break up a fight quick enough to suit her, our cook would

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come flying out of the kitchen with a meat cleaver in her hand, a scream on her lips, and a bloodthirsty look in her eyes. She'd take to swinging that blade around, and everybody in the place would duck for cover. By the time she'd calmed down and headed back into the kitchen, we'd all of us forgotten who'd been punching who in the first place. Pretty soon, I didn't bother stepping into customers' tangles, as word spread that Starchy's Cafay was under the protection of Crazy Kathy McKenna, and all she had to do was lay hand on that cleaver to restore order.

Now you might think it would hurt business, people having the impression they could end up with cold steel in their belly along with their beef stew. But cowboys being cowboys, it was the best advertisement our little establishment could have. Fellows would come in straight off the trail and order up a batch of fried chicken just so they could sit there and gawk at Crazy Kathy. Every now and then a couple of them would try to get a rise out of her by playacting they were headed for a fracas, but I soon learned to spot our amateur thespians early on and would politely suggest they take their food and their foolishness outside.

Of course, there were some townsmen who didn't find all this a real tickle, and one of them would drop by from time to time to remind us that he still wasn't laughing. Seeing as he was the town marshal, we didn't have any choice but to listen.

"That dirty mick cook of yours ever hurts anybody, I'm holdin' you two responsible," he'd say. Then he'd grab him a couple of biscuits and walk out. He was a big, boulder-headed son of a mule name of Ben Nickles, and men who opened their mouths too wide in his presence often found a gun barrel where their teeth used to be. So we just nodded, said a silent goodbye to our biscuits, and then got back to work. Old Red would store up his curses until the restaurant was closed for the night, then he'd start pouring them out all over me.

"He's a disgrace to his badge," he'd say. "If there's a problem he can't solve with fists or guns, then that's a problem don't get solved at all. The man's all muscle, no method."

That last bit was considered by Gustav to be the ultimate insult to a lawman's skills. He'd made a study on "method" after stumbling upon accounts of one Sherlock Holmes of London, England. This Holmes fellow's sort of a gentleman layabout turned sleuth who solves crimes by means my brother describes as "observation and cogitation." Driving cattle's a true test for nerves and muscle, but you might as well deposit your brain in a bank before you hit the trail, for you won't be needing it until you get back. My brother being a man with little learning but much smarts, I believe drovering had become a kind of mental torture for him. His mind was dying of thirst, and this Sherlock Holmes was a cool drink of water.

Whatever the explanation for it, my brother's fascination with

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Holmes drove him to snatch up every detective magazine he could lay hands on. Nick Carter, King Brady, Old Cap Collier, even Madge the Society Detective—we've read about them all. It didn't take long for Gustav to turn sour on these American crimebusters, though. All muscle, no method, he said. But we were stuck with them, as a yarn about Holmes is harder to find than a Mormon in a whorehouse. Gustav's only managed to rustle up two Holmes tales so far: one called "A Study in Scarlet," the other "The Red-Headed League." We end every day the same way, in the bed we share in the storeroom at the back of the shack, me reading out the story of Old Red's choice. I say a quiet prayer before we turn in that he won't ask to hear about Holmes, as I've read those two stories so many times the words are practically tattooed on my eyeballs.

Now let me warn you, spending the last waking hour of each day in the company of a dime-novel detective will do strange things to your sleep. My dreams are stuffed to bursting with black-caped kidnappers and bomb-lobbing radicals and skulking Chinamen with ruby-handled daggers hidden up their silky sleeves. It's almost a relief when Crazy Kathy barges in before the break of dawn to fire up the oven, making enough noise to wake the deaf and the dead alike.

Not long afterward our first customers bang on through the rickety door out front. Sometimes it's cowboys, sometimes it's railroaders. Either way, they want the same thing—coffee, biscuits, bacon, and eggs. When they start asking for beefsteak or beans, I know it's getting on toward noon. Every now and then some big-mouthed bull nurse will try to cut a shine on Crazy Kathy by calling out that he wants roast goose with oyster stuffing and he wants it now. If she's in a good mood, Kathy will ignore him. If she's not, she'll step out of the kitchen with that cleaver of hers and let the fellow know he's a catfish-faced son of a bitch and he's going to get beans.

For pure *mean,* we figured our cook was pretty near the hands-down champion of the plains. But eventually a customer came along who gave her a real run for her money. His name was Jack G. Johnson, and for two weeks solid he ate nothing but Crazy Kathy's cooking—breakfast, dinner, and supper. Why he did so was a mystery to us all, for he announced time and time again that it was the foulest hog slop he'd seen heaped on a plate since his days in the Confederate army. Of course, Kathy came out to challenge this notion the first time she heard it, but this Johnson fellow called her bluff.

"Get your ass back in that kitchen before I put my boot on it, you poxy Irish slattern," he growled at her. "And the next time you make me stew see to it you put some damn salt in it."

Every man in the place got set to jump when they heard that, for surely anyone slow on his toes was about to end up with old Jack's brains in his hair. But Crazy Kathy just sneered, spat at

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Johnson's feet—not *on* them, you understand, *at* them—and stomped off back to the griddle. It seemed Kathy had met her match, and those of us there to witness it could only gape in silent wonder. Johnson wasn't one to rest on his laurels, however.

"Hey, pimples," he said to an especially young puncher a couple chairs down from where he sat. "Stop your gawking and make yourself useful." He pointed at a salt shaker and snapped his fingers impatiently until it had been handed to him. Needless to say, the cowboy got no thanks.

Whereas Crazy Kathy added the kind of color our customers appreciate, no one appreciated Jack G. Johnson. Politics, religion, personal hygiene—no subject was taboo to him. He said men who wanted to keep Benjamin Harrison in the White House ought to have their heads examined, and men who wanted to put James Baird Weaver in Harrison's place ought to have their heads *removed.* Labor agitators should be shot on sight, but the real enemy were those Jew bankers in New York and the "mongrel races" flooding our shores from abroad. Sweep out the Chinese, the Irish, the Italians, the Poles, and the Russians—and exterminate the Indians down to the last suckling child while you're at it—and then this country might really stand for something again. Or so Johnson told us.

Every so often, there would be a fellow who agreed with every little thing he said, which seemed to annoy the man more than all those labor agitators and bankers and "mongrels" combined. He'd get to ripping into the poor chowderhead's crooked teeth or ratty clothes or big feet or some such thing, and before long his one potential ally would turn against him, and Johnson would be happy again.

But where Johnson's capacity for cussedness really took the prize was on the subject of Negroes and the Civil War. My brother and I hailing from Kansas and being of German stock, we have our own feelings on this matter. Gustav was born a year after the war ended, and I didn't mosey along until six years after him, but sometimes it felt like we were both of us at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg for all the talk we heard on it in our younger days. We were much aware that we'd lost three uncles, five cousins, and an aunt in the war. The uncles and one of the cousins died wearing blue. The others were cut down by rebel bushwhackers.

We'd also known a number of Negro cowboys over the years, for though you'll see nary a one in *Buffalo Bill Stories,* you'll find plenty working the trails. As with all men, some are good, some are bad. We didn't feel any hesitation about befriending the good, and one and all were welcome to spend their money in our little cookhouse.

But Johnson would get to fussing and cussing every time he

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found himself in the company of a Negro. And if he discovered you were a Union man—or, worse yet, a Union *veteran*—he'd lay into his Northern aggression, carpetbaggers, race mixers, and scoundrels speech. And if that didn't get a rise out of you, he'd wheel out the heavy artillery. The first time he did it, every customer in the place nearly emptied the stomachs they'd been trying to fill. Johnson had been storming away at Ricky Hess, a kid soda jerk who took his meals with us so he could hear the punchers blow some wind about life in the saddle. I think Ricky wanted to prove he had some eggs in his basket, for he was needling old Johnson right back, saying how Abraham Lincoln was a saint and your average Confederate soldier was nothing but a shoeless hillbilly fighting with a bent-barrel musket and a rusty butter knife.

"You want to see what the average Confederate soldier could do?" Johnson asked.

Ricky stiffened up and leaned back, getting himself set to dodge the old man's swing. But instead of throwing a punch, Johnson just smiled. His lips didn't stop at a simple grin though. They kept on going, pulling back until his whole face was stretched into an open-mouthed grimace, like he was screaming without making a sound.

And then the damnedest thing happened. Johnson's teeth began to *move*. They shifted to the right, shifted to the left, shifted to the right again, then wriggled themselves all the way free of his face. Johnson caught them in his hand as they fell and then held them up at Ricky.

"You see these, boy?"

Ricky nodded, staring slack-jawed at Johnson as if the man had just produced Jeff Davis from his mouth instead of a pair of dentures.

"Well, these ain't porcelain teeth. They're *Yankee* teeth, pulled from blue-bellies at Antietam." Johnson winked, and his pruned-up lips wormed themselves into another smile. "I do believe some of 'em weren't even dead yet. Those Northern boys weren't much in the way of soldiers, but I'll give 'em this much—they had some mighty fine choppers. These dentures were made for Major Dick Wheeler, my commanding officer, in eighteen sixty-two, and they served him well for twenty-four years. When he died, his widow was kind enough to give 'em to me. I had my son do 'em over to fit my mouth, and they've been chawin' up biscuits for me ever since."

Johnson glanced around the room and, satisfied that he had everyone's full and utterly horrified attention, got to opening and closing those dentures so it looked like his hand had itself a working mouth.

"Glory, glory, Hallelujah," he sang. "Glory, glory, Hallelujah. Glory, glory, Hallelujah. His truth is marching on."

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Ricky ran out of the place pale as a Klansman's sheet, Johnson cackling at him like some loco old squaw.

Now my brother typically adheres to a strict neutrality when it comes to customer disputes. "As long as folks can keep eatin', it ain't no business of ours," he'd say to me. But Gustav looked about ready to chuck that neutrality in favor of a public horsewhipping.

"Mr. Johnson," he said, and his voice sounded completely calm and respectful despite the words it was about to pronounce, "I'm advising you to keep those filthy things in your mouth when you're on my property or they're gonna end up . . ."

Well, the locale my brother suggested might offend delicate sensibilities, but it should suffice to say that depositing a pair of dentures there would be an unpleasant experience for all concerned.

Johnson didn't bat an eye. He just sucked in those teeth of his and got back to work on his chicken and dumplings. And come suppertime he was back again.

Gustav was glad enough to have the old man's money, if not his company. But I had to wonder why Johnson had to spend any money on grub at all. Certainly, he didn't come to Starchy's every day out of necessity. He had both an able-bodied daughter-in-law and a prosperous son, so home-cooking or a better class of restaurant were not beyond his reach. George J. Johnson, the son, was the top dentist around, the only competition in Billings being an opium-addled old quack name of Huggins who had the devil of a time convincing folks to call him "Painless" instead of "Brainless." As a result, Doc Johnson was doing enough business to make himself a real pillar of the community, the proof of which was his recent marriage to Elsa Mueller, the daughter of one of Billings's resident preachers (Lutheran, in this case) and a pillar in her own right as a leader of the town's growing temperance movement. Though it had been known that Doc Johnson was a Southerner, no one had known quite *how* Southern until Papa Johnson stepped off a train whistling "Dixie." The elder Johnson caused quite a stir, being as rude and hardheaded as his son was courtly and mild-mannered. The local tongue-flappers whispered that the old man had come West for his health, for he was a gnarled little lizard, and every day he seemed to turn more mottled and rashy-looking.

Now all this was but distant gossip for us no-accounts out on the edge of town until the day Johnson limped into Starchy's to plague us with his patronage. Despite the old man's constant complaints, *something* about our place agreed with him. He dragged himself in looking like a fellow not only at death's door but with one foot firmly inside the house. Within a few days, however, his color improved, his back straightened, and he was digging into Kathy's "hog slop" con mucho gusto. Some folks joked that Kathy's cooking had restorative properties and should be bottled as a patent elixir.

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Others said Johnson would thrive in any environment in which he could make himself a nuisance. Either way, he quickly became our most loyal—and loathed—customer.

He minded Gustav's warning, though, keeping his dentures perched on his gums where they belonged. But from time to time he'd brag on his "little Yankee prisoners" and set them to squirming around so much behind his smile it looked like he kept a snake in there.

While Johnson was fixed to Starchy's tight as a tick, Ricky Hess we didn't see for a while. It took him a week to work up the nerve to come back. But when he did return, he did it big, striding in puffed up like a rooster and taking an empty seat to the left of the old man.

Johnson didn't notice at first, for he had already divided his forces on two fronts, firing affronts into the kitchen where Kathy was frying him up a steak while aiming the occasional barrage at the fellow to his right, a black puncher by the name of Feathers Purnell.

Though Ricky was trying to come off tough, I noticed him fiddling nervously with a salt shaker as I walked up to take his order.

"I'll have whatever he's havin'," he said, jerking a thumb at Johnson. When the old buzzard turned to point his beak at him, Hess gave him a hearty slap on the back. "How ya doin' today, reb? What's the latest news from Richmond?"

Johnson gave him a squint hot enough to bake a cake. "I'd thank you to keep your hands off me, you miserable little piss-puddle," he said.

I got set to haul myself over the counter and pull him and Ricky apart, but before either man could fire off a punch toward the other's face, Kathy stomped out of the kitchen and threw a plate down in front of Johnson.

"There's yer steak," she said. "May ya choke on it and catch the first coach to Hell."

Kathy's curse brought a smile to the old man's lips, and he turned away from Ricky and called after her, "If it tastes as bad as your cookin' usually does, chokin' to death will be sweet mercy."

Johnson snatched up his fork and knife, and for a second there everyone watching expected one or the other to end up in Ricky's throat. But the old man got to sawing away at his beef instead. He stuffed a big, bloody strip of it into his mouth, gave it a couple of chews, then winced and swallowed.

"Damn, woman," he said, bringing a hand up to rub the left side of his face. "I asked for steak, not fried rope." His cheeks bulged on one side, then the other, as his tongue probed around inside his mouth. He fished a finger in there and pulled out a small yellow

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sliver. "I've eaten shoe leather more tender than this. Ain't nothin' on this plate but gristle and bone."

But as much as he complained about that first bite, it didn't stop him from carrying on with a second and a third and so on. In-between chews he cheerfully badgered Kathy and Ricky and Feathers, squeezing off insults at each one in turn before starting around the circle again when he'd made a full rotation of it. Kathy and Feathers took it quiet, her busying herself with her cooking and him busying himself with his fried oysters. But young Hess sparred back, and whenever he and Johnson swallowed their last mouthfuls I figured we'd be right back where we started, with the two of them ready to throw around fists instead of harsh words.

After a few minutes, however, Johnson seemed to lose his taste for fighting and steak both. He went all quiet halfway through a remark about Feathers' mother and dropped his knife and fork on the countertop with a clatter that turned me around from the dirty plates I'd been handing to Gustav. Johnson had gone sweaty slick since the last time I'd glanced his way, and he proceeded to wrap his arms around his stomach and let out a moan like a motherless calf on a cold night.

"You all right, mister?" Feathers asked.

"Do I . . . look . . . all right?" Johnson gasped, managing to be nasty even when it appeared he hardly had the strength to stick out his tongue. He pushed his chair back and stood up. "I just . . . need to . . . go outside and . . ."

He didn't get anywhere near outside. After three wobbly steps, he swooned and hit the floor, managing to turn over a table and cover himself with other men's dinner in the process.

Feathers made it to him first, rolling Johnson over and brushing cornbread crumbs and beans off his face. The old man's eyes rolled back in his head, the lids fluttering, and a breathy whisper slipped through his trembling lips.

"What's he sayin'?" I asked.

Feathers leaned his ear in close. Then he put his hand up to Johnson's face again, this time wrapping the palm and fingers across the old man's eyes and nose and sort of giving a little squeeze. Then the cowboy stood up, a look on his face like the kind a fellow gets after taking a sip of rancid buttermilk. But he didn't say a thing.

Gustav piped up then. "Frank," he called out to one of our regulars, "go get Doc Snow. Anvil, I think you oughta fetch Doc Johnson. And quick, boys."

"You think he's dyin'?" I asked as Frank and Anvil darted out the door.

Gustav gave me one of those stares that tell me he's not altogether convinced he and I could come from the same bloodline.

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Johnson took to heaving and purging after that, and soon he and the dirt floor around him were far from a pretty sight. As much as I might have cursed the man in my heart the past few weeks, it still stung to see him squirming like a gut-shot dog.

Now one thing you've got to understand about a town like Billings is, entertainment and spectacle are in mighty short supply. Not having an opera house, a music hall, a zoo garden, or any other modern place of amusement, folks out here have to make do with shootings, hangings, and fires. Misfortunes of all sorts being popular viewing, a man dropping a hammer on his foot is just about all you need to draw a crowd. So by the time Frank got back with Doc Snow, the two of them had to push their way through a swarm of spectators that had gathered around to witness the infamous Jack G. Johnson's final moments. Thanks to that crowd, Frank and the doctor missed those moments by about a minute, for when they finally wriggled past the last onlooker, Johnson was dead.

That didn't keep Doc Snow from hunkering down and giving the man's twisted-up corpse a good going over. Snow was an altogether overeducated, overmannered, and overefficient fellow to have landed in a place like Billings without some trouble back East sending him our way. Folks viewed him as the gift horse you don't look in the mouth, however, so nobody asked too many questions about his past. They just listened to what he had to say and thanked the Lord they didn't have to get all their medical advice from strangers selling miracle cures off the back of medicine-show wagons.

So it hit the crowd like lightning when the town's one and only respected physician stood up, brushed off his frock coat, and announced, "This man was poisoned."

While everyone else was still sputtering out things like, "What?" and "Did he say 'poisoned'?" and "Hooo-whee! Murder!" Old Red was bending over the body asking the doc how he'd come by his conclusion.

"The symptoms," Snow said. "And you'll notice crescents of white on the fingernails and a whiff of garlic still on the tongue. All signs of *poudre de succession.*"

Gustav looked up at Snow. "All signs of what, now?"

"Poudre de succession," Snow said again (and I'll admit right here I only know how to spell it out because I tracked him down this morning and asked him).

Before Snow could lay out for my brother and the rest of us rabble exactly what he was talking about, Anvil Hayes elbowed his way to the center of the room.

"Couldn't get Doc Johnson. He's out to the Lazy P pullin' teeth. Won't be back till tonight," Anvil said. "I told his wife the old man's

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sick, though." He looked down at the body, and I couldn't tell if the chagrin on his face was because Johnson had died or because he'd missed the dying.

Just then the crowd began to part like the Red Sea before Moses, and I knew before he even stepped into my sight that Billings's top lawman had arrived to irritate my brother with his enthusiastic application of muscle over method.

"Damn it all, is that man dead?" Marshal Nickles asked as he pushed past Anvil.

"As dead as the proverbial doornail," Dr. Snow replied.

"Doc said it was poison," I added, trying to be helpful. "Poo-drey dee zoo-zay-zion or some such."

"Arsenic," Snow finally explained.

That sent another lightning bolt through the place, and half the men there seemed compelled to shout out "Arsenic!" like it was "Hallelujah!" and they were at a tent revival. But none of them hollered louder than Nickles, who immediately whirled off toward the kitchen and backed Crazy Kathy up against the stove.

"All right," he said to her. "Let's go."

"What're ya talkin' about?" Kathy asked, a tremor of fear in her usually commanding voice. "Where would I be goin', then?"

"You're comin' with me to the jail, that's where you're goin'."

"Hold on there, Marshal," my brother said, following Nickles into the kitchen. "We don't know who slipped Johnson the poison. There ain't no proof it was Kathy."

"You shut your trap. And while you're at it, shut your doors." Obviously pleased by the rare (for him) experience of making a clever remark, Nickles let his mouth tilt over into something that was half sneer, half smile. "I've warned you about lettin' this crazy Irish hag do your cookin'. Far as I'm concerned, you and your brother are practically murderers yourselves. So I'm orderin' you to close this fly-trap down till we can get this in front of a judge. And don't give me any back-talk about it. Just be glad you ain't under arrest . . . yet."

Then Nickles turned back to Kathy, locked a big paw on her wrist, and yanked her toward the door. She unraveled a string of curses on him that would make a soldier's ears bleed, but I saw terror in her eyes. The crowd moved back to let them through, then flowed in around them like quicksand, swallowing the two up and blocking our view.

I heard Gustav sigh and start rooting around for something in the kitchen. When he stepped out, he was strapping on his gun-belt.

"Better get yourself heeled, brother," he said to me. "We don't want poor Kathy runnin' into a lynchin' bee between here and the jail."

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I dusted off my iron and strapped it on, wondering all the while if the mob wouldn't see fit to string us up, too, guns or no.

As it turned out, there was no need to fret about a lynching just yet. Quite the opposite; everyone seemed to take Johnson's murder as an excuse for a holiday, and Kathy wasn't in jail ten minutes before there were fellows outside selling boiled peanuts and ginger beer. Some folks even began spreading out blankets and getting down to picnics.

Gustav and I tried to get inside the jail to have a word with Kathy, but one of Nickles's deputies encouraged us to amble along. As this encouragement came from the business end of a Winchester, we ambled. We could hear Kathy somewhere inside the jail, though, still telling Nickles his head was packed full of the stuff you pay a man a penny to shovel off a stable floor.

We sparked a good bit of commentary as we weaved our way through the throng, everybody trying to play Eddie Foy with cracks like, "Hey, boys! I hear the cookin' at your place is to die for!" and "Mind if I send my mother-in-law over for supper tonight?"

"Well, Old Red," I said once we'd escaped the jeers, "what do you think? The five o'clock or the eight-thirty?"

"The five o'clock or the eight-thirty *what?*"

"Train, brother. Five o'clock east, eight-thirty west. I vote for east, myself. From Miles City we can head all the way down to—"

Gustav gave me a look of disappointment and dismay he'd inherited from our mother. "We ain't goin' anywhere," he said. "Kathy needs our help."

"Oh, come now. There ain't no helpin' crazy folks. You know that. Hell, she probably did it."

"Well, then you just think of it as helpin' ourselves. It'd look mighty bad, us skeedaddlin' now. Like maybe Kathy had some help curling Johnson up. And what about Starchy's Cafay? We can't just walk away from that."

"I ain't sayin' we walk away. I'm sayin' we *run*. You heard those fellers back there. Starchy's ain't nothin' worth stickin' around for. The place was ruined the second Johnson hit the floor."

"We're stayin'," Gustav said, using the tone of voice that told me he was pulling rank. There would be no more debate. The elder brother had spoken.

"All right. We stay. For now. But how in God's name are the two of us supposed to help Kathy?"

"It won't just be the two of us. We've got an important friend on our side."

"Oh?"

I ruminated for a second on our friends in Billings, none of whom you could label "important." "Penniless," perhaps. Or "powerless." "Drunk," "rowdy," and "smelly" would also fit just fine on

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most. But there wasn't an "important" in the bunch.

"Just who are you thinkin' of?"

"Why, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, of course."

My brother gave me a sly little wink, and I took to wondering if crazy is something you can catch. After all, he'd spent a lot of time in the kitchen with Kathy. Maybe she'd given him a bad case of the locos.

Not that Gustav can't do up a fine display of detective-style thinking every so often. Mr. Holmes has this way of spinning little details into big "deductions," and my brother had taken a pretty fair whack at it on a few occasions. Then one day he pointed out a fellow slurping on some soup in Starchy's and told me he'd deduced that the man was a Hebrew butcher who'd served in the army and just returned from California. Turned out he was an Italian tailor two months off the boat from Europe, and he was as far west as he'd ever been in his life. My faith in my brother's grasp of "method" was never quite the same after that.

And anyway, even Holmes himself couldn't prove trees can sing, dogs have wings, and extra glue makes for tasty donuts. Kathy's innocence I saw as being much the same. I figured she'd walk free about the time I saw a flock of beagles flying south for the winter. Which meant Starchy's was finished, and so were we.

I was pulled free of these gloomy thoughts by an even gloomier sound—that of a woman weeping. It was Elsa Johnson, the old man's daughter-in-law. She was in our shabby little shack, looking about as out of place as a pearl on a plate of baked beans. Her white silk dress could just about blind you it was so gleaming clean. She was sitting with her back to the body, her slender shoulders shuddering slightly with delicate, ladylike grief. Doc Snow held one of her hands in his and whispered quiet comforts in her ear as Howard and Andrew Gould, the paunchy namesakes of Gould Brothers Funeral Parlor, hovered over the corpse like a couple of fat-bellied vultures in thirty-dollar suits. A simple wooden box lay near the corpse. It was just for toting stiffs, I assumed, being too plain for burying the father of an honorary member of the thriving merchant class.

We'd put on hats before running off after Nickles and Kathy, and I swiped mine off my head and elbowed Old Red to remind him to do the same.

"Ma'am," I said. "I would like to convey our most sincere condolences to you and your husband in this time of loss. If there's anything we can do to be of assistance, I just ask you to let us know and it will be done."

It was my thinking that a little honey could sweeten Mrs. Johnson's disposition towards us, which might help us sidestep reciprocations of a legal nature. But when that woman stood and turned

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to face us, she looked at me like I'd dumped a bucket of cold water on her head.

"You've already done enough," she said, her voice icy calm despite the tears she'd been shedding just a moment before. She looked at the Gould brothers and nodded her head. "It's time we left."

"Hold on there, ma'am," Gustav said. "Someone needs to examine the body before it's moved."

"Excuse me?" If she'd looked at me like I'd been throwing water around, the glare she gave my brother suggested his bucket was full of vinegar—or worse.

"That's how . . ."

I cringed, knowing the words "Sherlock Holmes would do it" were about to come from my brother's mouth. He seemed to sense what a damn dumb thing this would be to say, and he managed to get his lips pointed in a different direction before the damage could be done.

" . . . police back East handle this kind of thing."

It was an improvement, but it still didn't get a warm reception.

"I don't care how 'police back East' do things. My husband's father is dead, and I will not have strangers pawing over his body."

She nodded at the Goulds again, then walked briskly into the kitchen and out the back door. Doc Snow was a step behind her, fixing to catch her should she faint, I suppose. The Gould brothers followed, too, after loading up Jack G. Johnson with the dainty touch of a woman packing away fine china—which was a tad funny, seeing as he wasn't in any condition to complain should you yank off his ears. Out back they slid the box up on a wagon, then proceeded to cart away the Johnsons, both living and dead.

Dr. Snow started to drift off after the wagon, but Gustav shouted out, "Doc!" and waved him back. He seemed a touch reluctant to step foot inside our humble establishment again, and he stopped just short of the door.

"That was rather indelicate, your request to the lady," he said to Gustav. The few times I'd run across him in the past, Snow had struck me as a rather stiff, crusty fellow, and now it looked like his contact with Mrs. Johnson had put even more starch in his collar.

"Ain't nothin' delicate about murder," my brother replied with such confidence and bravado you'd think he'd been a New York constable all his days instead of a farm boy, drover, and dishwasher. "Anyway, I thought you were a man of science."

Now a fair enough response would have been, "What do *you* know about being a 'man of science'? You can't even spell the words." Instead Snow blinked and kind of harrumphed and said, "I am."

"Good," Gustav said. "Then you can tell me if there's a test for arsenic."

Snow nodded. "The Marsh Test. It's simple enough. Through the application of heat one can convert arsenic into arsine gas, which

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can be precipitated on a surface such as a mirror or a porcelain dish as a—"

There was more, but I can't get it straight even after more talk with the doc. Suffice it to say the answer was indeed "yes," and Gustav disappeared into the lunchroom and came back a moment later holding a plate topped with a half-eaten serving of steak and potatoes.

"You think you could apply all that hoo-ha you just talked up to this here chow?"

"Certainly."

Gustav held out the plate. "All right, then."

Snow took hold of the plate reluctantly, like he was being handed a bowl of scorpions. "This was Johnson's dinner?"

"That's right."

"I have to warn you—I'll feel obligated to report my findings to Marshal Nickles."

"That's what I'm countin' on," my brother said, sounding like he already knew what those findings would be and the test itself was practically beside the point. "When can you have an answer?"

"Tonight, maybe. Tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Good. I'll leave you to it."

As Snow went on his way, looking buffaloed to find himself walking across town with a plate of steak in his hand, I asked Gustav what exactly he expected this "Marsh Test" would prove.

"I've been practicin', brother," he replied. "Tryin' to shape myself into a real top-drawer observationalist, just like Mr. Holmes. And let me tell you—I was in the kitchen when Kathy was frying up that food for old man Johnson, and I didn't see her doctor it up with anything but salt and pepper."

"Yeah, you were in the kitchen, all right," I said. "Washin' dishes. You tellin' me you could scrub a pot and keep the eagle eye on Kathy at the same time?"

Though I half expected Old Red to take to barking at me for my lack of faith, he actually smiled and almost—*almost*—peeled off a chuckle.

"That's good, you askin' questions like that. I do believe you've picked up a thing or two from Mr. Holmes yourself," he said. "A first-class detective ain't gonna trust nobody's observations but his own."

"I ain't no detective," I said. "I'm a cowboy, and so are you. Now let's act like it and just saddle up, hit the trail, and forget this whole ugly . . ."

It was no use. He wasn't even listening to me anymore. He'd turned away and picked a frying pan up off the stove, and now he was staring into it like a sideshow Gypsy stares into her crystal ball.

"What do you see there?" he asked me, flipping the pan around and shoving it under my nose.

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I shrugged. "Grease and gristle."

"That's right."

He clanged the pan back on the stovetop and snatched up a salt shaker from a shelf nearby.

"Every order of beef and taters Kathy did today got fried up in that pan—including a couple for fellers who moseyed in *after* Johnson." Gustav's words came out slow and quiet as he upended the shaker and sprinkled some salt in the palm of his left hand. "If she'd put any arsenic on the old man's food while it was cookin', we'd have ended up with more than one corpse clutterin' up the place."

He ran a finger over the granules in his hand, and I leaned in to get a closer look myself. Growing up, I had more experience with arsenic than with salt. The former we kept in ample supply to deal with rats and coyotes. The latter my mother guarded like it was gold dust, doling out about a pinch a year for the seasoning of food while hoarding the rest for pickling and preserving.

"Salt," I said.

"Salt," said my brother.

He clapped his hands clean then ran through the same business with the pepper.

"Pepper," I said.

"Pepper."

We spent the next half-hour peeking into every canister, prodding around all the corners, and poking away at anything that looked even the tiniest bit like arsenic powder. By the time we finished up, our hands were chalk-white with flour and sugar and baking soda, but there was no arsenic to be found.

"All right," Gustav said, wiping his hands clean on his trousers. "The food wasn't poisoned in the kitchen."

"I don't know. Kathy might still have the poison on her," I pointed out. "In one of her pockets, let's say. She could've slipped it out when the food was ready and sprinkled on a touch before I took it to Johnson."

"Just sloppin' it over the top? 'Here's your steak, Mr. Johnson. Hope you like it extra *powdery.*' Even you would've noticed that."

"What do you mean, even me?"

But once again I was just giving my mouth muscles some exercise, for my brother had closed up his ears and moved on. He headed into the lunchroom and walked up to the chair in which Johnson had eaten his last supper.

"Ricky Hess," he said, pointing to the seat to the left of it. "Feathers Purnell." He pointed to the seat on the right.

"You think one of them did it?"

" 'It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence,' " Gustav said. " 'It biases the judgment.' "

I recognized the quote right away, coming as it did from *A Study*

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in Scarlet, a story I've read so many times I'll still have bits and pieces of it bouncing around my skull if I live to be older than Noah.

"Well, before you go gettin' any ideas, I'll just point out that it's also a capital mistake to run around accusing people of murder," I replied. "Folks tend to take that kind of thing rather personal."

I may as well have been warning the sun not to come up in the morning. My brother just said, "Grab your scratch paper," and headed for the door. I followed, after snatching up the tattered old envelope and pencil I sometimes used to take orders when too many fellows got to shouting out their druthers at the same time.

I didn't need any of Mr. Holmes's method to figure out who Gustav was going to put the eyeball on first. When I caught up to him, he was headed for the stockyards over by the railroad depot. Feathers had been there for days helping the Triple T boys load up a herd of beeves bound for Chicago.

"So what am I supposed to do with this paper?" I asked Gustav.

"Write on it."

"My word, what a notion. You mean like . . ." I pulled out the pencil, gave the lead a lick, and began moving it over the envelope. "'My . . . brother . . . is . . . a . . . horse's—"

"I can't very well take notes myself, now can I?" Old Red snapped, grumpy that he had to come right out and say it. "I need you to kind of . . . chronicle things."

My reading and writing were a gift from my elder siblings, as they worked extra hard so at least one member of the family—the baby, yours truly—could stay in school long enough to get some actual use out of it. I'm ever mindful of this, which is why I don't buck too hard when Gustav needs use of the skills he was too busy farming and driving cattle to collect for himself.

"I understand," I said. "I'll be like your Doc Watson."

Gustav gave me a hard look, and I knew I was being compared—none too favorably—to Dr. John Watson, the fellow who writes up Sherlock Holmes's adventures for the magazines.

"All you gotta do," my brother said, "is keep track of the clues."

"How am I supposed to know what they are?"

Gustav shook his head. "I'll let you know. Now button your lip. There's Dave Ryan."

Ryan was the Triple T's trail boss. He gave us a big grin as we approached and let us know he'd be eating his meals over at Blythe's Restaurant from now on. We took the joshing the only way we could—by shrugging and pretending to chuckle—and Gustav quickly moved things along to the point of our visit. Ryan told us where Feathers was and let us know it was all right to talk to him for a while . . . long as we didn't try to slip the man any food. We laughed again, thanked him, and walked away cussing him

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under our breath.

"You know, it's just gonna be more of the same long as we stay in Billings," I said to Gustav once we'd corked up our curses.

Old Red made a noise that might have meant "Ain't it a shame?" and might have meant "We'll just see about that" and might have meant "That corn on my toe sure is painin' me today." I didn't bother asking which, as he probably wouldn't have told me. Sometimes I think if words were water, my brother would be Death Valley.

We found Feathers with a couple other punchers, all of them using prod-poles to convince a group of bellowing beeves they ought to move on up into a cattle car. We got more japes thrown at us by the other two hands, but Feathers didn't even light up a smile. When we called him over for a parlay, he came slow and wary, like a dog approaches a man with meat in one hand and a switch in the other. That struck me funny, the relations between us being normally friendly, if not overly familiar.

"What do you want?" he asked us.

Though I'm usually the talker between the two of us, I decided to let Gustav have the honor of responding.

"Just wanted to ask you a few questions about what happened this afternoon," he said.

Feathers squinted at him. "Why ask *me* questions?"

"Cuz you were there."

"Lot a men were there."

"But you were up close."

"Not really."

"Well, you were the first one to get to Johnson when he fell. Looked like he even whispered something in your ear."

Feathers shook his head. "No words. Just noises. Like he was gasping for breath."

"But then after that I saw you kind of put your hand on him. Across his eyes. I thought maybe he'd already—"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

That stopped Gustav cold. He just stared at Feathers for a second, a little twitch kicking up around his eyes. When he spoke again, he sounded bona fide bewildered. "Now, Feathers," he said, "I saw you place your—"

"You're a damn liar. I never touched the man." Feathers began to back away from us, his eyes spitting fire. "Now you two just clear on out. I ain't got nothin' more to say to you."

He walked back to the cattle chute and grabbed up his prod-pole. Then he glanced back and gave us a look that said he was ready to use that big, mean stick on steer or man alike. That was enough to prod *us,* and we left.

"So," I said as we walked away, "you just let me know which

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clues I should be jottin' down and I'll—"

"Oh, shut up."

I don't always mind my brother when he gives me this little nugget of advice, but I did so now. I figured he was discovering detectiving isn't as easy as he'd made it out to be, and a man's got a right to be a mite tetchy when his daydreams get cut down and used for kindling.

But Gustav wasn't ready to light up that particular bonfire just yet. From the way he steered us through the streets, I reckoned our next stop would be C.V. Kramm Drug & Variety Store, where Ricky Hess spent his days jerking sodas. But as we passed by another store, Bragg & Company Dry Goods, Gustav froze up, spun on his heel, and marched inside.

We got a right warm welcome from Bragg and company. There were eight or nine people in the place, and they all greeted us with a smile. Several were even so kind as to point out exactly where the rat poison was stocked. I rode it out just fine, being accustomed to both making sport and being sported in turn. But Gustav's face turned almost as red as his hair, and the more folks pulled his leg the closer he got to kicking them with it.

"I'd like to have a word in private," he said to Mr. Bragg, a cheerful old backslapper with muttonchops so big they practically drooped out over his shoulders like a gray shawl.

"Why, certainly, Old Red," Bragg said, peering over my brother's head to wink at his customers. "There's something I'd like to ask you, as well."

Bragg stepped out from behind the counter and waved us back to a dark corner of the store.

"I'm wonderin' if Kathy McKenna, Ricky Hess, or Feathers Purnell have bought any arsenic off you in the last week or so," Gustav asked, his voice low once the three of us were circled up away from our audience.

The face under Bragg's carpet of whiskers turned mock serious. "I thought that's what you'd be asking," he said. "Well, I don't know this 'Feathers Purnell,' but I understand he's a Negro cowhand, and we haven't had any trade with the likes of that. As for Hess, I haven't had any business from him, either, though his aunt and uncle are regular customers. Kathy comes in often enough as well, but I can't recall selling her any arsenic recently. Which isn't to say she hasn't purchased any in the past. I'd be surprised if she hadn't."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Bragg chuckled. "Because it's easier to say who *hasn't* bought rat poison than who has. I can barely keep the stuff on the shelves."

Like most cow towns on a railroad line, Billings has rats like a dog has fleas. As even I could see, that meant mere possession of rat poison could hardly be considered a black mark against you. If

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it did, nearly everyone in town would be a candidate for the noose.

Gustav seemed to come to the same conclusion as he thanked Bragg and turned to go. But Bragg reached out and snagged hold of his arm before he could take a step.

"Hold on. I've got a question for *you*, remember?"

My brother nodded curtly. "So ask it."

Bragg cleared his throat, then spoke in the loud, clear tone of voice men reserve for delivering either sermons or digs that are meant to be overheard.

"When you're on the stand, I'd appreciate it if you'd testify that you bought the poison here," he said. "That kind of word-of-mouth advertising can't be beat."

Gustav jerked his arm from Bragg's hand and stomped from the store, followed by both me and the guffaws that nipped at our heels. I pulled out my envelope and pencil again.

"Now what exactly should I write down? 'Nothing,' 'nada,' or 'nil'?"

My brother didn't break stride, just bolted once again toward C.V. Kramm Drug & Variety Store. I pocketed my note-taking gear and trailed along behind him. When we got to Kramm's, we found the fellow Gustav wanted to see hunched over a dime novel.

"Well, howdy there, pard," my brother said, taking a seat across from Ricky Hess and his gleaming brass soda fountain. Gustav's words had a casual, joshing quality about them I'd never heard him use before.

Ricky looked up and smiled. "Old Red! Big Red! What are you two doing here?"

At the sound of our nicknames, C.V. Kramm himself poked his head around the corner. He was in a back room, no doubt grinding up a treatment for vapors or shingles or some unpleasant thing. He took a short break from his important work to shoot us a hostile glare.

"Good day to you, Mr. Kramm," Gustav said with uncommon cheer. "My brother and I thought it was about time we tried one of these here 'cola' drinks folks've been talkin' about."

Kramm couldn't quite muster a smile, but he did at least give us a nod. Then he was gone.

"I do believe your uncle doesn't care for us," Gustav whispered at Ricky.

The boy gave the back room a disdainful wave of his hand. "Awww, he doesn't like me going down to Starchy's."

Gustav winked. "Full of bad influences, huh?"

"So he says. Did you really want a cola?"

"Sure we do. Show us your stuff."

Ricky grinned and made a big show of scooping up our glasses, juggling them around, squirting in some syrup, and playing that

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soda fountain like it was a church organ. Gustav pretended to find the boy's display a right fascinating sight, but I saw his eyes flicker this way and that when Ricky was too caught up in his performance to notice.

"Here you are, fellers," Ricky said, sliding the glasses down smoothly onto the marble countertop. "Don't drink 'em too fast. They'll give you hiccups."

Though personally I can't see the sense in paying out good money for anything in a glass that won't get you drunk, both Old Red and I had sampled our share of fountain drinks over the years. Yet my brother took to smacking his lips over that cola like it was ribeye steak after a week on hardtack, so I did the same. There followed perhaps a minute of conversation on the unfortunate events at Starchy's, but my brother playacted like this topic was already a terrible bore and his only concern was finding us a new cook. He changed the subject by asking Ricky what he'd been reading when we came in.

"Oh, nothing," the boy replied bashfully.

I leaned over and took a peek at his magazine. " 'Jesse James and the Cheyenne Treasure,' " I read aloud.

"Jesse James?" Gustav sputtered in mid sip. He slapped his glass down and shook his head with fatherly disappointment. "I'm surprised at you, Ricky. Readin' one of them rags that make *Jesse James* out to be some kinda hero. The man was just a dirty reb thief and nothin' more."

"I know. But . . . well, I just—"

"Who's that feller up there?"

Leaning up against the long mirror behind Ricky were three portraits—Abraham Lincoln, U. S. Grant, and a middle-aged fellow in dress uniform I'd never laid eyes on before.

"That's my grandfather. Colonel D. L. Kramm. He was killed at Shiloh."

"Oh, was he now? Well, what do you think old Colonel Kramm would think of 'Jesse James and the Cheyenne Treasure'?"

"I . . . I don't know . . . he . . . I never . . ." Ricky began fiddling with an empty glass as he stammered, and something about the nervous fluttering of his fingers caught my eye and tickled my memory.

"Is that any way to honor your granpappy?" Gustav prodded Ricky. "Lookin' up to some mad-dog bushwhackin' murderer?"

"I do honor my grandfather. I do. I even—"

Gustav perked up so much at these words he practically took to floating above his chair. But at just that moment C.V. Kramm stepped out of the back room again and shouted for Ricky. He was holding a small package wrapped in brown paper.

"Take this over to Mrs. Gluck and come straight back with a dollar and two bits and not a penny less."

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"Yes, sir." Ricky whipped off his white soda-jerk's apron, took the package, and gave us a halfhearted wave as he hurried out the door. He almost looked relieved to be escaping from us.

Instead of skulking back off to his pills and powders, Kramm took Ricky's position behind the soda fountain.

"I couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation," he said to us. "It's not so much Jesse James that boy idolizes. It's no-account saddle-tramp cowboys."

Gustav didn't even look at the man he was so lost in thought, so I took the liberty of answering for both of us.

"Oh, don't you fret, C.V. We was the same way when we was his age and just look how good we turned out! It's goin' on six weeks since I last shot a man in the back, and Old Red here hasn't rustled any cattle in months!"

"Drink up and get out."

My brother didn't bother to finish his cola, but I wasn't about to let Kramm kick me out without first getting my nickel's worth. So I threw my head back and drained the rest of my drink so fast I was hiccupping before I could even set the glass down.

"So, brother—what *hic* do you want me to *hic* chronicle for you *hic?*" I asked as we headed back toward Starchy's.

"If you want to 'chronicle' the fact that you're a flannel-headed fool, then go right ahead. Otherwise, don't bother."

"Now *hic* don't tell me we *hic* don't have any clues."

"Most likely we've already got all the clues we need." Gustav kicked at the dirt, and when he spoke again all the backbone was gone from his voice. "I just don't know what the hell they are."

"Well, *hic* I bet even Sherlock Holmes *hic*—"

"Otto."

"Yes *hic?*"

"Don't talk to me till you're over those damn hiccups."

"All *hic* right."

Hiccups being hiccups, of course, I couldn't keep quiet even though I wasn't saying a word. Gustav could only take it so long. Cursing "these infernal distractions" that cramped up his cogitations, he banished me from the restaurant practically the moment we arrived.

"Go on over to the jail and make sure that mob ain't gettin' restless. And don't come back until you've stopped making that blasted noise!"

As it turned out, the mob at the jail was nothing to worry about, as it had broken apart and drifted off when it became clear no necks were going to get stretched just yet. They'd be back tomorrow, though, when Kathy went before the justice of the peace for a hearing. If he said Yea, there would soon be a trial. If he said Nay, Kathy would be released—though that would hardly be a victory for her, as it was as likely as not that a makeshift Vigilance Com-

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mittee would quickly decide a trial wasn't really all that necessary anyway. The oddsmakers had a Yea as an even money bet, as Thomas Fraser, Billings's justice of the peace, was known to be friendly with the Johnsons—so much so that Mrs. Fraser had been sipping tea with Mrs. Johnson when news reached them of the old man's death.

I learned all this from the deputy marshal who'd threatened us with lead poisoning when we'd asked to see Kathy earlier in the day. He still wouldn't let me in to speak with her, but he was a far more agreeable, talkative fellow without a bloodthirsty crowd around to put him on edge. Also I credit myself with having a way of putting folks at ease, though my silk tongue was sorely tested by those hiccups.

By the time I finally ambled back to Starchy's, both the hiccups and the light of day had faded away. Old Red seemed to have faded as well, for I found him in bed with a pillow over his face.

"You asleep?" I asked.

"Nope," Gustav said, his voice muffled by burlap and feathers. "You hiccuppin'?"

"Nope."

"Good. I need to talk to you."

I eased myself down onto a corner of the tattered soogan we treat like a double bed. I'd been anticipating this talk for hours. In fact, I'd already decided how to play it. If my brother couldn't quite bring himself to give me a flat-out apology for this whole restaurant fiasco, I'd be gracious about it. All I cared about was putting it behind us. But I was firmly opposed to sneaking out of town in the middle of the night. We still had more than two hundred dollars in the bank, and I didn't intend to leave Billings without it.

"I've been thinkin'," Gustav said from under his pillow. "Thinkin' and thinkin' and thinkin' in circles. And I keep endin' up in the same place."

"I understand," I said since he couldn't see me nodding sympathetically.

"There's somethin' I've overlooked—somethin' Mr. Holmes would see that I don't. I need you to help me get a bead on it."

"I understand," I said again, though I wasn't entirely sure I did. This was not the talk I'd been hoping to have.

"Somehow somebody got that poison into Johnson a few minutes before he died. Now I wasn't out front at the time to see who was doin' what where. But you were. I need you to think hard—brain-bustin' hard, brother—and tell me everything you recollect from the time Johnson walked in to the time he keeled over."

"All right. But you gotta do somethin' for me first."

"What's that?"

"Well . . . do you think you could have this conversation without

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a pillow on your face?"

After a long, quiet moment, my brother brought up his hands and pressed them down on the pillow—and kept them there. "It helps me think," he said.

So I spent the next hour talking to a pillow and a pair of hands. I started out with what I'd seen before Johnson died. Then, just out of sheer momentum, maybe, I carried on through the rest of the day, laying out my impressions of our attempts at Sherlocking.

I half expected to hear snoring coming out from under that pillow when I was finally done, so still were my brother's hands, but instead Gustav just said, "Thank you. You go on to sleep now." I was mighty tired by then, and I gave him no arguments. Soon I was the one doing the snoring.

Now one thing you learn when you're working the cattle trails is how to sleep light when you need to and heavy when you can. Since I no longer have any stampedes or rustlers to worry about, I can go as heavy as I please. So once I start catching my winks, almost nothing on earth can keep me from collecting all forty—not even Old Red sitting bolt upright and shouting, "Of course!" Or the sound of my brother jumping out of bed and banging around that restaurant like a bronc kicking his way out of a corral. Or the curses that soon followed. Or, a little later, what seemed to be the scuffing steps of a not particularly graceful man dancing a happy jig. All these noises came to me like echoes in my dreams, and when I awoke the next morning I could hardly be sure I'd really heard them at all.

I hefted myself out of bed and shuffled off in search of my brother, intending to round up a report on the night's happenings. I found him in the front room freshly shaved, dressed in his cleanest clothes, and sunny as a California July. Yet while he seemed uncommonly cheerful, he was no more chatty or charitable than usual.

"If you wanted explanations, you should've tracked 'em down yourself, cuz you saw all you needed to see to put you on the right trail," he said. "I ain't got time to walk you through it now. I need you to get busy makin' yourself presentable. You look worse than a sharecropper's scarecrow."

When I was shaved, combed, and dressed to Gustav's satisfaction, he finally let me know why we needed to dude ourselves up.

"While you were back in there sawin' logs, I was out arrangin' a little meetin' over to the Gould Brothers Funeral Parlor," he said. "It's set for quarter to nine. I need you to make sure Marshal Nickles and Judge Fraser are there."

"Now how am I supposed to do that? Ben Nickles would just as soon hang us as wave hello."

Gustav gave me a sly look of the sort that usually precedes a wink. "If you need to give Nickles a prod, you just tell him I've got Jack G. Johnson's *real* murderer hogtied and ready for a brand.

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And I don't care if the brand's his so long as justice is done. If that don't do it . . . well, I'm sure you can polish it up right with that slick talkin' you do."

It made sense to send me for Nickles and Fraser. I'm the talker. Gustav's the thinker. But looking at my brother then, I had to wonder if all that thinking hadn't overheated his head, like a fast horse that's been baked by a hard rider. After all, the man had taken to lying around with a pillow over his face.

"All right," I said reluctantly. "I'll try."

I found Nickles and Fraser in the judge's office. The hearing wasn't supposed to start until ten, but those two fellows looked so chummy I reckoned the judge wouldn't feel the need to hear a single word by that time. His decision would've been made hours before.

Now, if there's one thing in this tale in which I can take a personal kind of pride, it's this: Not only did I *try* to lure them over to the Goulds', I *succeeded*. As their minds were firmly closed to persuasion, I went by way of their hearts. Which is not to say that I appealed to their compassion, since I have my doubts as to whether Nickles has any to which one could appeal. Instead, I needled both men mercilessly, alluding to the ridicule and shame that would befall them should Old Red Arnlingmeyer capture a culprit they were too stubborn to do anything about themselves. This fanned in them a tiny ember of doubt and a blazing fire of annoyance, and I believe they followed me primarily so they could later have the satisfaction of arresting me.

We arrived at the funeral parlor just a few minutes late. Howard Gould met us at the door, his round face sagging with strain, and he escorted us into the main viewing room mumbling about improprieties and irregularities. There were three men waiting for us. One of them was laid out in a beautiful maple-wood box. The other two were Doc Snow and my brother.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Dr. Snow," Judge Fraser said. He's a short, bushy-browed Scot with all of his clansmen's natural gift for ladling out scorn. "I hope you're not going to tell me you're mixed up in this nonsense."

Doc Snow's not the kind of fellow to brook much in the way of sass himself, and he responded first by dismissing Gould, then by brushing a bit of imaginary fluff off his sleeve, and finally by looking up at the judge as if he'd almost forgotten the man was there. "I am," he said.

"Damn it all!" Nickles exploded. "Somebody better get to explaining or Crazy Kathy's gonna have some company in her cell!"

Doc Snow looked at Gustav, so I looked at Gustav, so Nickles and Fraser looked at Gustav. Jack G. Johnson didn't look at anything but the insides of his eyelids.

My brother cleared his throat and pulled himself up to his full

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height, like a preacher getting set to rain down some fire and brimstone.

"All right," he said. "I can do the explainin'. But you gents might want to seat yourselves before I set into it. It's gonna take a good bit of talk to spool out.

"Now I don't know if any of you have heard of Mr. Sherlock Holmes of London, England. If you haven't, Marshal Nickles, I suggest you acquaint yourself with him at your earliest convenience. For when it comes to puzzle-bustin', he's the cock-a-doodle-doo. And he said somethin' once that I've been tryin' to keep in mind ever since I watched Johnson here cash in. 'In solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able to reason backward.'

"It occurs to me that layin' the blame on Kathy McKenna is reasonin' *forward*—and skippin' a few steps as you go along. It's true enough that she and Johnson weren't exactly cordial with each other. And it's also true that Kathy can be quite the wildcat when she's riled. But there's a big difference between breakin' up fights by wavin' a knife and seasonin' a man's vittles with arsenic. Poison is a sly, sneaky way to lay a person down, and there ain't much sly and sneaky about Crazy Kathy. If she'd taken a mind to kill Johnson, she wouldn't have plotted it out beforehand. She would've just grabbed up a blade and sunk it into the man's skull.

"But when you're known as 'Crazy Kathy,' I suppose people are liable to jump to conclusions. Even so, I would hope there would be some kind of search for what the experts call 'data' or 'clues' or 'evidence,' but I don't mean to call into question the abilities of anyone present, so I won't dwell on that now. I'll just move along by mentionin' the thought that struck me as I watched Kathy dragged away to the hoosegow: If someone were to slip a dose to Johnson, Starchy's would be the place to do it, as Crazy Kathy's reputation would ensure that the hand of the law would quickly fall on her.

"If, that is, the poison got noticed at all. I'm proud to say my brother and me haven't passed any bad meat or butter or eggs since we've been runnin' Starchy's, but we all know it's easy enough to get doubled up on rotten grub you buy from someone else's kitchen. On top of that, Johnson was an old man, and not a very fit one at that to see him a couple weeks ago. If Doc Snow had been attendin' to sick folks outside town or tied up with some other business—or even if he'd just been a less book-smart and sharp-eyed feller than he is—we wouldn't be here talkin' about murder at all. We'd just figure the reaper finally caught up with the ornery old snake, and he'd be planted without a second thought or a single tear.

"So I got to thinkin', there's a slippery side to these goin's-on that folks aren't gettin' hold of. Havin' studied on Mr. Holmes's way of doin' things, I thought maybe I could. The way to start, I figured, was to cut the likeliest suspects out of the herd—'sus-

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pects' bein' detective lingo for folks you *suspect* might be guilty of somethin'. But I'm sure you already knew that, Marshal.

"Now there were really only two suspects to be had, far as I could see: Ricky Hess and a puncher name of Feathers Purnell. They were the fellers sittin' on either side of Johnson when he got that arsenic in him. The old man had given each of 'em a taste of his venom in the past, so maybe it wasn't no accident they were next to him when someone slipped him a taste of poison.

"I went to see both of 'em yesterday, and afterwards I had a devil of a time figurin' which one had done it, for I came away convinced it had to be one or the other. You see, Feathers was the first feller to try to help Johnson after he hit the floor. The old man whispered somethin' to him, somethin' he didn't seem to like at all. And then Feathers laid his hands on Johnson kinda peculiar-like—though he called me a liar for sayin' so later, and I saw it all with my own eyes. And Ricky, he runs orders for his uncle. I've heard tell them druggists use arsenic in some of their medicines, so who's to say Ricky couldn't borrow himself a sample?

"Well, I set about to ruminatin' on all this last night, and damned if I didn't just about melt down my brain like so much candle wax. But I kept at it, and Mr. Holmes's advice about reasonin' backward finally gave me my first step ahead. I was thinkin' about Feathers puttin' his hands on Johnson's face the way he done. What's the use of such a thing? And why deny it? Johnson was already plenty sick, so it's not like Feathers needed to get any more poison in him by then. So maybe it was because of whatever Johnson said—not that it would make much sense for him to tell Feathers, 'I'm fadin' fast. Would you mind stretchin' your hands 'cross my face before the death rattle commences?' In fact, wouldn't he say just the opposite, seein' as how Feathers is a Negro and Johnson had made his hatred of that race plain time and time again?

"Once I hit upon that, I knew exactly what Feathers had heard and why he'd reacted the way he had. You see, the old man's last words on this earth were in keeping with all the nastiness he'd spread around before 'em. He'd said, 'Get your hands off me, nigger.' And Feathers decided to show the old bastard that his days abusin' black folk were over, so he gripped a hand right to Johnson's face. But this wouldn't go down too well with some—a Negro actin' in such a fashion with a dyin' white man, even one as hated as Johnson. So Feathers wisely decided to keep all this to himself.

"Now this didn't put Feathers in the clear, but it did explain some of what needed explainin', and that freed me to concentrate on Ricky. He'd let the old man sorta run him out of Starchy's a week or so back, and when he finally showed his face again yesterday he seemed to be tryin' to live that down. I was back in the kitchen at the time, but I could hear him and Johnson tradin'

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stings somethin' fierce. Now though the boy was tryin' to act tough, he had him a touch of the jitters—or so it would seem from somethin' my brother told me. Like a lot of fellers, Ricky likes to get his hands to workin' when he's nervous. I noticed that when I was puttin' a little fire under his saddle-warmer yesterday. And it appears his fingers were plenty busy when he was ribbin' the old man, for Otto here saw Ricky playin' with the salt shaker on the counter in front of him.

"I was lyin' down when I first got to cogitatin' on that salt shaker, but soon enough I hopped up and tried to work out a way to kick myself in the pants, for surely I'd been lookin' right over somethin' that was as hard to miss as a cougar in an outhouse. Johnson liked his food with a dash of pepper and a fistful of salt, and everyone around Starchy's knew it cuz he'd get to screamin' for the seasonings before the first bite even got off his plate. If there was somethin' you wanted on the man's food, here was a guaranteed way to get it there. When I realized this, I went chargin' out to the counter and grabbed up that salt shaker and turned it right over. And do you want to know what happened?

"The top came off. The whole thing emptied out in about two seconds. Ricky had been up to somethin' all right, but not murder. He'd been lookin' to catch Johnson with a trick boys have been pullin' since the day a shaker first put salt on food. Just to be sure, I spent a good amount of time sifting through that salt, and I assure you it was all crystals, no powder.

"Well, I sat there starin' at the mess I'd made for a good long while. I put the quirt to myself all night, and this was the best I could do. I was about to give up and go to sleep, but then I noticed somethin' else lyin' there on the counter where Johnson had been sittin'. A teeny yellow-brown ditty, not much different than a thousand other little things my brother and I sweep up and throw out every day. But it told me everything I needed to know. You see, I hadn't really been reasonin' backwards at all. I thought I knew the who, and I'd been tryin' to use that to get to the how. What I needed to do was go the other way. The how could tell me the who. And it did."

Out in the funeral home's foyer, chimes began to ring. It was nine o'clock, which meant my brother had been working his lips more than ten minutes straight. I wondered that those lips didn't drop right off, as sometimes a month went by without so many words passing between them. But unaccustomed as Gustav might have been to speechmaking, he had all of us there in his spell. Even Nickles seemed more than a little awestruck when he piped up to ask, "What was it you saw?"

"That's a fair enough question, Marshal. But before I answer, I'd like Dr. Snow to tell you what he told me this mornin'." Gustav turned to Snow. "About Johnson's food."

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Doc Snow nodded, then looked to Marshal Nickles and Judge Fraser. "There's a way to test for the presence of arsenic—the Marsh Test. Old Red asked me to try it on what was left of Johnson's food. I did, and it came up negative. I couldn't find the smallest trace of poison."

"But . . . but you said yourself Johnson died of arsenic poisoning!" Nickles blustered.

"That he did."

"But if it wasn't in his food—?"

I heard a door open in the front hall. Footsteps and low, murmuring voices followed. The sounds seemed to be some kind of signal for Gustav, for he quickly fished something out of his vest pocket and handed it to Nickles, and when he spoke again his words were running at a gallop.

"This is what I found on the counter, Marshal. Now what would you say that is?"

Nickles held up a small, dirty-yellow sliver no bigger than a pebble. I leaned forward to give it a stare and suddenly remembered the ugly little something Johnson had pulled from his mouth after his first bite of steak the day before.

"Looks like bone," Nickles said.

Gustav shook his head, then turned and walked to the casket that held Jack G. Johnson. What he did next knocked a gasp out of Nickles, Fraser, and myself—though our gasps were nothing compared to the *scream*. Howard Gould had opened the doors into the viewing room just as Old Red plunged a hand into Johnson's mouth, and the sight of my brother rooting around in there like a bear after honey set Mrs. George J. Johnson into a fit of hysterics. I glanced around to see her husband and Gould steering the woman into a chair as her head rolled back and her legs went all wobbly. Then a horrible *shlurp* kind of sound pulled me back in the other direction. What I saw there was my brother yanking the old man's dentures right off his gums.

Well, as you might imagine, there was quite an uproar, with cries of outrage just about peeling the paper off the walls. But though Gustav was talking more slowly and softly than anyone else, his voice seemed to cut through, and before long folks were actually listening to it.

". . . chip of tooth, not bone," he was saying when everyone piped down enough for me to hear his words. He brought the dentures over to Nickles and Fraser and pointed at one of the Yankee teeth old Johnson used to brag on so much. "You can see the tooth it came from. It's been hollowed out. It's one of the big ones in the back, too. What do you call these, Mr. Johnson?"

Johnson had a fresh face of sun from his ride out into the coun-

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try the day before, but even with the red there he somehow looked pale. "How dare you—"

"It's a molar," Doc Snow interrupted, looking so unruffled by this strange turn of events I had to figure (rightly, I learned later) that he'd helped my brother arrange them.

"Thank you, Doc. You think you could run that Marsh Test on this here 'molar'?"

Snow nodded, his eyes fixed on the Johnsons. "Certainly."

"Good. Though I don't know if it's even all that necessary, for if you gents take a good look, you'll see there's still some powder crammed up in there."

Both Fraser and Nickles took that good hard look, and once they did they shifted their glares over to young Johnson and his half-conscious wife.

"One thing I could never figure out about old man Johnson was why he kept comin' back to our place," Gustav said. "But you know, as much as he complained about the grub, it seemed to do him good. For if you'll recall, he had the color of a scabby toad a few weeks back, but he looked to be gettin' better with each passin' day. And I wonder now if that's because there was somethin' about Mrs. Johnson's cookin' that didn't agree with him—somethin' that sent him out lookin' for the cheapest food in town that wouldn't leave him feelin' sick as a dog. And if that certain somethin' couldn't be got to him through his food, well, maybe there was another way. It wouldn't be that hard to do if you had yourself a drill and a skill with teeth. You could fix it so your handiwork wouldn't show, then just wait for somethin' tough—like one of our ten-cent steaks, for instance—to pop off a bit of tooth and let the poison inside get to seepin' out. And doin' it roundabout like that had a big advantage, in that you could make sure you wasn't within a mile of the old man when he—"

Mrs. Johnson woke up enough then to start bawling and carrying on something awful.

"God help us!" she sobbed. "The old man was a monster! A demon! He—!"

"Elsa!" her husband roared, leaping to his feet to tower over her.

The woman's words choked to a stop with a weepy whimper. When he was satisfied that she would say no more, young Johnson turned to face us again.

"This disgusting spectacle has unhinged my wife," he said. "I'm going to take her home. If you insist on continuing with these hideous insinuations, you can call on me later. But now I'm leaving."

He and Gould helped Mrs. Johnson to her feet, and the three of them moved with slow, shuffling steps out of the room.

"You're gonna let 'em go?" I asked Nickles.

It was Fraser who answered. "They'll be dealt with in due time,"

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he said. "I see no reason not to allow them the opportunity to face this with dignity."

I thought back to the way Nickles had dragged Crazy Kathy off to jail and didn't recollect anything dignified about it. But I suppose pillars of the community have to be removed with special care. Or so think other pillars.

As it turned out, the Johnsons removed themselves, for when Marshal Nickles went to question them again an hour later they were both dead. There was no mystery as to the cause, as the tea cups and rat poison were left in plain view. What they hadn't seen fit to leave out, Nickles reported, was a letter of explanation—though of course the town was soon awash in rumors that this was a lie. The suicide note had been destroyed by Nickles and Fraser, folks whispered, as it revealed shocking improprieties old Johnson had taken with his daughter-in-law—improprieties her family wanted hushed up.

Gustav shrugged off such talk, saying he had no "data" with which to judge its merits. When I asked him about the *why* of Johnson's murder, he shrugged.

"Could be he really did take liberties with the lady. Could be his cussedness was bad for business. Could be he was an embarrassment for such fine, upstanding citizens," he said. "Could be he snored. Could be his feet smelled bad. Could be they just got sick of the old goat. All I know is, I've got dishes to wash."

And that he does—more than ever. For the Johnsons' misfortunes seem to have made ours. Though the appeal of it entirely escapes us, everyone else in Billings has gone out of their way to eat at least one meal at the scene of the town's most famous murder. Some even ask to sit in Johnson's chair and order up exactly what he was chewing on when the arsenic did its work. We've been so busy, I've hardly had time to set this down on paper, which is why it heads out to you nearly three weeks after the fact.

I will now do my best to wait patiently for your response, though I'll admit that the thought of appearing in your publication has me wound so tight I could bust a spring. I certainly hope that you share my enthusiasm now that you've reached the end of my tale. I can't say whether your readers would embrace detective adventures of the sort experienced by Mr. Sherlock Holmes, but give them a native-born sleuth employing the same methods on our own Western plains, and they'll surely holler for more.

Sincerely,

O.A. Amlingmeyer
Billings, Montana
October 14, 1892

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FREE DURT

by Bill Pronzini

They were out for a Saturday drive on the county's back roads when they saw the sign. It was angled into the ground next to a rutted access lane that wound back into the hills—crudely made from a square of weathered plywood nailed to a post. The two words on it had been hand-drawn, none too neatly, with black paint.

FREE DURT

Ramage laughed out loud. "Look at that, will you? Proof positive of the dumbing-down of America."

"Oh, don't be so superior," Carolyn said. "Lots of people can't spell. That doesn't mean they're illiterate."

"D-u-r-t? A five-year-old kid can spell *dirt* correctly."

"Not everyone's had the benefits of a college education, you know. Or a cushy white-collar job."

"Cushy? Any time you want to trade, you let me know. I'd damn well rather be a school administrator than an ad-agency copywriter any day."

"Sure. At half the salary."

"Beside the point, anyway," Ramage said. "We were talking about that sign. Whoever made it couldn't've got past the first grade—that's the point."

"You can be such a snob sometimes," she said. Then: "I wonder why they're giving it away?"

"Giving what away? You mean dirt?"

"Well, out here in the country like this. Why don't they just spread it over the fields or something?"

"That's a good question."

"And where did they get so much that they have to give it away

Bill Pronzini's accomplishments as a writer are so many that the summary of them in the *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers* stretches to nearly four pages. This coming September, Mr. Pronzini and his wife, writer Marcia Muller, will be honored for their contributions to the field at the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention in Chicago. We salute them both. This new story had its seeds in a trip they took together.

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for nothing? Some kind of construction project?"

"Could be." He slowed the BMW, began looking for a place to turn around. "Let's go find out."

"Oh, now, Sam . . ."

"Why not? I'd like to know the answer myself. And I'd like to meet somebody who doesn't know how to spell *dirt*."

She put up an argument, but he didn't pay any attention. He drove back to the rutted lane, turned into it. It meandered through a grassy meadow, up over the brow of a hill and down the other side. From the crest they could see the farm below, nestled in a wide hollow flanked on one side by a willow-banked creek and on the other by a small orchard of some kind. The layout surprised Ramage. He'd expected a little place, run-down or close to it, something out of Appalachia West. He couldn't have been more wrong.

It wasn't just that the farm was large—farmhouse, big barn, smaller barn, chicken coop, two other outbuildings, a vegetable garden, the rows of fruit trees, fences around the house and along the lane farther down and marching across the nearby fields. It was that everything was pristine. The buildings, the fences gleamed with fresh coats of white paint. The wire in the chicken run looked new. There wasn't anything in sight that seemed old or worn or out of place.

"Whoever owns this may not know how to spell," Carolyn said, "but they certainly know how to keep things in apple-pie order."

Ramage drove down between the fences and into the farmyard. A dog began to bark somewhere in the house as he nosed the BMW up near the front gate. Once he shut off the engine, the noise of the dogs and the clucking of chickens and the murmur of an afternoon breeze were the only sounds.

They got out of the car. The front door of the house opened just then and a man came out with a dog on a chain leash. When Ramage got a good look at the man, he thought wryly: *Now that's more like it. Farmer from top to bottom, like the one in the Grant Wood painting.* In his sixties, tall, stringy, with a prominent Adam's apple and a face like an old, seamed baseball glove. He was even wearing overalls.

As he brought the dog out through the gate, Carolyn moved close to Ramage and a little behind him. Big dogs made her twitchy. This one was pretty big, all right, some kind of Rottweiler mix, probably, but it didn't look very fierce. Just a shaggy farm dog, the only difference being that its coat was better groomed than most and it didn't make a sound now that it was leashed.

"Howdy, old-timer," Ramage said to the farmer. "How you doing?"

"Howdy yourself."

"We were driving by and saw your sign down by the road."

"Figured as much. Brings visitors up every now and then."

"I'll bet it does."

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"Interested in free dirt, are you?"

"Might be."

"Can't get but a couple of sacks in that little car of yours."

"We couldn't use any more than that. You the owner here?"

"That's right. Name's Peete. Last name, three e's."

"Sam Ramage. This is my girlfriend, Carolyn White."

Carolyn gave him a look. She didn't like the word girlfriend. Ms. Feminist. But hell, that was what she was, wasn't it?

"What's the dog's name?"

"Buck."

"He doesn't bite, does he?" Carolyn asked.

"Not unless I tell him to. Or unless you try to bite him."

That made her smile. "You have a nice place here, Mr. Peete."

"Suits me."

"Must take a lot of work to keep everything so spick-and-span."

"Does. Always something that needs tending to."

"Keeps you and your hired hands busy, I'll bet."

"Don't have any hired hands," Peete said.

"Really? Just you and your family, then."

"No family, neither."

"You mean you live here alone?"

"Me and Buck."

"Must be kind of a lonely life, way out here, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I like it. Don't like people much." Peete was looking at Ramage's right hand. "Some trick you got there, young fella," he said.

Ramage grinned. He'd been knuckle-rolling his lucky coin back and forth across the tops of his fingers, making it disappear into his palm and then reappear again on the other side.

"That's his only trick," Carolyn said. "He's so proud of it he has to show it off to everybody he meets."

"Don't pay any attention to her. *Her* only trick is running her mouth."

"Never seen a coin like that," Peete said. "What kind is it?"

"Spanish doubloon. I picked it up in the Caribbean a couple of years ago."

"Genuine?"

"Absolutely." Ramage did three more quick finger rolls, made the coin disappear into his hand and then into his pocket. "I don't see this free dirt of yours, old-timer. Where have you got it?"

"Barn yonder."

"Let's have a look."

Peete led them across the farmyard to the smaller of the two gleaming white barns, the big dog trotting silently at his side. On the way Ramage asked conversationally, "What do you keep in the big barn? Cows?"

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"Don't have any cows."

"Sheep? Goats?"

"No livestock except chickens. Big barn's for storage."

"Farm equipment?"

"Among other things."

When they reached the smaller barn, Peete unlatched the double doors and swung one of the halves open. Ramage could smell the dirt before he saw it, a kind of heavy, loamy odor in the gloom. It was piled high between a pair of tall wood partitions, not as much as he'd expected, but a pretty large hunk of real estate just the same—ten feet long, maybe twenty deep, by seven or eight feet high. He moved closer. Mixture of clods and loose earth, all dark brown with reddish highlights. Some of it toward the bottom had a crusty look, as if it had been there for a while; the rest seemed more or less fresh.

"What makes this dirt so special?" he asked the farmer.

"Special?"

"Well, there's a lot of it, and you keep it in here instead of outside, and you give it away free. How come?"

"Best there is. Rich. Good for gardens, lawns."

"So why don't you use it yourself, on that vegetable garden behind the house?"

"I do. Got more than I need."

"Where does it come from?" Carolyn asked. "Someplace on your property?"

"Yep. Truck it in from the cemetery."

She blinked. "From the . . . did you say cemetery?"

"That's right. It's graveyard dirt."

There was a little silence before Ramage said, "You're kidding."

"No, sir. Gospel truth."

"Graveyard dirt."

"Yep."

"From a cemetery on your property."

"Yep. Old Indian burial ground."

"Never heard of any Indian tribes around here."

"Long time ago. Miwoks."

Carolyn asked, "You don't desecrate the graves, do you? Just so you can carry off a lot of rich soil?"

"Nope. Do my digging in the cemetery, but not where the graves are."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm sure. You would be, too, if you saw the place."

"Miwoks?" Ramage said. "I didn't think they ranged this far south."

"Nomadic bunch, must've been."

"Nomads don't build cemeteries for their dead."

Peete fixed him with a squinty look. "Don't believe there's a bur-

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ial ground close-by, that it?"

"Let's just say I'm sceptical."

"Prove it to you, if you want," Peete said. "Take you over and show it to you."

"Yeah? How far away is it?"

"Not far. Won't take long."

Ramage looked at Carolyn. "Oh, no," she said, "count me out."

"Real interesting spot," Peete said. "Artifacts and things."

"What kind of artifacts?" Ramage asked.

"Arrowheads, bowls, pots. Just lying around."

"Uh-huh."

"Fact. See for yourself."

"Not me," Carolyn said. "I don't like cemeteries. And I've seen all the Native American artifacts I care to see."

"No damn spirit of adventure," Ramage said.

"You go ahead if you want. I'm staying right here."

She meant it. And when she got stubborn about something, you couldn't change her mind for love or money.

Ramage said disgustedly, "All right, the hell with it. I guess we'll have to take your word for it, old-timer. About the dirt and the burial ground, both."

"Some do, some don't. Suit yourself."

"For now, anyway," he added. "Maybe some other time."

"Any time you want to see it." Peete gestured at the pile of free dirt. "How many sacks you want?"

"None right now. Some other time on that, too."

Peete shrugged, led them out of the barn into the sunshine. He closed the doors, set the latch, and started to move off.

"Hold on a second," Ramage said. And when the farmer stopped and glanced back at him, "About that sign of yours, down by the road."

"What about it?"

"Don't take offense, but you misspelled *dirt.*"

"That a fact?"

"It's with an 'i,' not a 'u.' D-i-r-t. You might want to correct it."

"Then again," Peete said, "I might not."

He took the dog away to the house without a backward glance.

Carolyn said, "Did you have to bring up that sign?"

Ramage ignored her until they were in the car, bouncing down the rutted lane. Then he said, more to himself than to her, "Some character, that Peete."

"You think he's just a dumb hick, I suppose."

"Don't you?"

"No. I think he's a lot smarter than you give him credit for."

"Because of that business with the dirt and the Indian burial ground? I didn't believe it for a minute."

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"Well, neither did I," she said. "That's the real reason I didn't want to go along with him. The whole thing's a hoax, a game he plays with gullible tourists. I wouldn't be surprised if he misspelled *dirt* on that sign just to draw people like us up here."

"Might have at that."

"If we'd gone along with him, what he'd've shown us is some spot he faked up with Native American artifacts and phony graves."

"Just to get a good laugh at our expense?"

"Some people have a warped sense of humor."

"Didn't look like Peete had any sense of humor."

"You can't tell what a person's like inside from the face they wear in public. You ought to know that."

"I'd still like to've seen the place," Ramage said.

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"Satisfy my curiosity."

"You'd've been playing right into his hand."

"Still. I can't help being curious, can I?"

He stayed curious all that day, and the next, and the next after that. About the fake Miwok burial ground, and about Peete, too. How could the old buzzard afford to pay for all the upkeep on that farm of his, and give away good rich soil, when he had no help and no livestock except for a few chickens? Crops like alfalfa, fruit from that small orchard? Maybe he ought to drive back out there, alone this time, and have a look at the "cemetery" and see what else he could find out.

On Friday afternoon, Ramage decided that that was just what he was going to do.

The snotty young fella named Coolidge said, "I don't believe it."

"Gospel truth."

"Graveyard dirt from some old Indian cemetery?"

"Every inch of it."

"And you truck it in here and hoard it so you can give it away free. You think I was born yesterday, Pop?"

"Prove it to you, if you want."

"How you going to do that?"

"Burial ground's not far from here," Peete said. "Other side of that hill yonder."

"And you want me to go see it with you."

"Up to you. Only take a few minutes."

Coolidge thought about it. Then he grinned crookedly and said, "All right, for free d-u-r-t, why not? What have I got to lose?"

"That's right," Peete said. He tightened his grip on Buck's chain, tossed his new lucky piece into the air with his other hand. Sunlight struck golden glints from the doubloon before he caught it with a quick downward swipe. "What have you got to lose?"●

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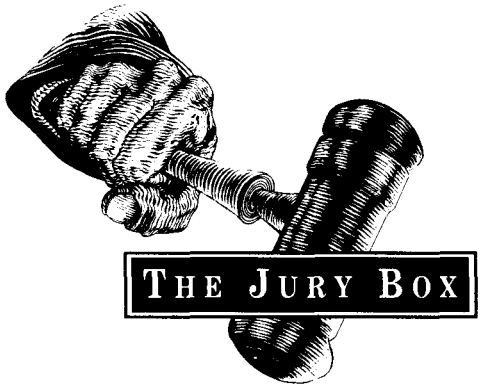

by Jon L. Breen

The last months of 2004 brought a scholarly feast to Sherlockians: a splendid new two-volume edition of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 56 short stories about the Baker Street sleuth, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (Norton, $75), edited with a foreword and copious notes by Leslie S. Klinger; and an updated second edition of Alan Barnes's *Sherlock Holmes on Screen: The Complete Film and TV History* (Reynolds and Hearn/Trafalgar, $29.95), a handsome hardcover only five dollars more expensive than the 2002 trade-paperback edition. Earlier in the year came two pastiches in which female chroniclers take Watson's role and bring Holmes a touch of romance.

*** Laurie R. King: *The Game,* Bantam, $23.95. In 1924, Sherlock Holmes and wife Mary Russell travel to India at the behest of an ailing Mycroft for a wild espionage adventure involving Rudyard Kipling's Kim. (Mary had thought Kim fictitious, but notes that half the world thinks Holmes fictitious!) The seventh novel about this unlikely marriage upholds a high standard, though the Shakespearean disguise ploy of the latter stages strains credulity.

*** Lora Roberts: *The Affair of the Incognito Tenant,* Perseverance, $13.95. In 1903, the mysterious beekeeper Mr. Sigerson leases a Sussex manor house and investigates the mysteries of a hidden gem and a village vampire, while evading the murderous Colonel Moran. The narrator, gentlewoman-turned-housekeeper Charlotte Dodson, shares Holmes's gift for observation. The handling of the two characters and some dramatic scenes of menace make this one of the better Sherlockian pastiches.

**** Joseph Telushkin and Allen Estrin: *Heaven's Witness,* Toby, $19.95. When analyst-in-training Dr. Jordan Geller hypnotizes actress Robin Norris in an effort to correct her voice problem, he regresses her to a past life and her possible murder by a still-active serial killer. Deftly shifting suspicion among a variety of suspects while seri-

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ously airing the pros and cons of reincarnation, the authors deliver one of the most intensely involving and expertly executed mysteries of the year.

**** Mat Coward: *Over and Under,* Five Star, $25.95. London cops Don Peckham (brilliant and bipolar) and Frank Mitchell (dutiful and patient) investigate murder by baseball bat at the scene of the annual comedians-vs.-writers cricket match. Coward, one of the funniest writers in the history of crime fiction, provides observations on comedy fandom, European-vs.-American sport, and health delivery systems, along with a nicely twisted whodunit.

**** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *The Last Dark Place,* Forge, $23.95. The first chapter of this eighth novel about Chicago cop Abe Lieberman, set in 1969, is a self-contained short story of extraordinary impact and resonance, and the rest of the book lives up to the opening. This is a superb example of the modular police procedural, with several disparate cases—one of which sends Lieberman on two trips to Yuma, Arizona—followed and resolved. The personal lives of Lieberman (whose grandson is about to have his bar mitzvah) and partner Bill Hanrahan (whose Chinese-American wife faces family objections to her marriage) are not the wearisome interruptions that mark too many contemporary mysteries but indispensable plot and thematic elements.

*** Bill Crider: *Dead Soldiers,* Five Star, $25.95. Carl Burns, small-college English Department chair in Pecan City, Texas, probes the death of a retired colleague and its connection to the toy-soldier-collecting hobby shared by his dean and police chief Boss Napier. It's an efficiently plotted and highly amusing male cozy, with the obligatory plot tangents more sitcom than soap opera and the side issues more pop cultural than domestic. Burns stops the action at one point to make a list of the ten best Western movies (good list, but he leaves out *High Noon).*

*** Margaret Coel: *Wife of Moon,* Berkley, $22.95. On Wyoming's Wind River Arapaho reservation, Father John O'Malley and lawyer Vicky Holden encounter a present-day murder linked to famed photographer Edward S. Curtis's 1907 visit to the rez. It's a solid professional job, with a well-worked-out past/present crime plot.

*** Sandra Balzo: *Uncommon Grounds,* Five Star, $25.95. The opening day of Maggy Thorsen's small-town Wisconsin coffee store is marred by the espresso-machine-electrocution murder of one of her partners. Standard elements of breezy first-person narration, cop/amateur sleuth romance, and varied cast of suspects are adeptly deployed in this first novel, and the plotting and cluing are well above average in the current market.

*** Laura Childs: *The Jasmine Moon Murder,* Berkley, $19.95. Moving from coffee cozy to tea cozy, the fifth case for Theodosia Browning, proprietor of Charles-

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ton's Indigo Tea Shop, has a richly detailed regional background, including a fox hunt with no fox, a ghostly charity event in an historic graveyard, a subtle main clue healthcare professionals might spot, and an intriguing enough mystery for even those uninterested in tea. (A dozen pages of recipes and tea lore are appended.)

** Tony Hillerman: *Skeleton Man,* HarperCollins, $25.95. Despite promising elements (notably the hunt for some diamonds lost in a collision of planes over the Grand Canyon a half-century ago) and the accustomed humor and sense of place, this is a weak entry in the long series about Navajo investigators Joe Leaphorn, Jim Chee, and Bernie Manuelito.

** Joanne Fluke: *Sugar Cookie Murder,* Kensington, $16. Minnesota baker Hannah Swensen's exploits represent the domestic cozy at its coziest, with humorous style, likable characters, enlightening household hints, and a pleasant small-town setting, this time during a snowy Christmas season. The whodunit plot, however, proves a severe letdown. (Of 341 pages in my proof copy, the novel takes up only 168, the rest devoted to recipes. Is this a record?)

Among several welcome reprints is Erle Stanley Gardner's *Top of the Heap* (Hard Case, $6.99), a good 1952-vintage Donald Lam/Bertha Cool case originally published as by A.A. Fair. Stuart Palmer's 1937 novel about schoolteacher sleuth Hildegarde Withers's visit to Mexico, *The Puzzle of the Blue Banderilla* (Rue Morgue, $14.95), has an informative introduction by Tom and Enid Schantz, who have also revived one of the best cases of my favorite husband-and-wife sleuthing team, Kelley Roos's Jeff and Haila Troy, the 1942 novel *The Frightened Stiff* (Rue Morgue, $14.95). The hardcover reissues of John le Carré's first two George Smiley novels, 1962's *Call for the Dead* and 1963's *A Murder of Quality* (Walker, $18 each), have new forewords by P.D. James and Otto Penzler respectively and excellent previously-published introductions by the author. The Women Write Pulp series now includes Evelyn Piper's classic 1957 suspense novel about a vanished four-year-old, *Bunny Lake is Missing* (Feminist Press, $12.95 trade paper; $49 hardcover), with a lengthy critical afterword by Princeton University scholar Maria DiBattista. (*New Yorker* contributor Piper was no more a pulp writer than the previously included Dorothy B. Hughes, but why quibble?)

Pat and Dick Lupoff's *The Best of Xero* (Tachyon, $29.95), a selection from a science fiction fanzine published in the early 1960s, includes several items of interest to mystery readers: Harlan Ellison on Hitchcock's film of Robert Bloch's *Psycho;* Donald E. Westlake on why he left s.f., followed by responses his inflammatory remarks generated; and Ed Gorman on his dissatisfaction with super-hero comics. An introduction by film critic Roger Ebert evokes the fan experience.

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Art by Allen Davis

ROBE TO MANDALAY

by Edward D. Hoch

"I want you to transport this jeweled robe to the Mandalay Museum and Library," Professor Bodawa told us. Ives and I had been summoned to the Southeast Asian Museum in upper Manhattan on this blustery February morning to meet with the old gentleman. It was a small museum, but its size was perfectly suited to Bodawa, who stood little more than five feet tall.

"Couldn't it be sent by Fed Ex for a lot less money?" Ives asked, and I could have kicked her.

The professor shook his head vigorously. "No, no, no! Valuable art treasures like this must be shipped by courier. We can't take any chances on its being lost or damaged." He looked at me curiously. "You've never done this before, Mr. Stanton?"

"Oh, certainly. We've transported valuable goods both out of and into the country, but certainly nothing as lovely as this robe." I ran a gentle hand over the red silk fabric with its fancy brocade and hundreds of small rubies. "This is a treasure," I assured him, "worth all the care we can give it."

I managed a glare in Ives's direction, and she took up the conversation. "Are you selling it to the museum?"

"No. They've requested a long-term loan of three years. For their

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sesquicentennial, the museum is mounting a collection of Mandalay regalia gathered from all over the world. The city was the capital of Burma before the British took over in eighteen eighty-five and moved the capital to Rangoon. Mandalay is a cultural and religious center of Buddhism, with some seven hundred pagodas of great beauty. That is why this robe contains seven hundred rubies."

"Are you Burmese?" she asked. "Is that how you acquired the robe?"

Professor Bodawa lifted his head and smiled. For a moment he seemed to have grown in stature. "I am indeed, and proudly so! I brought this ceremonial robe with me when I came to America forty years ago. It is the most valuable item in my little museum."

"Just how valuable?" I liked hard figures on jobs like this.

"It is insured for one million dollars, the most I could get, but I believe the robe would bring two or three times that much at auction. The rubies alone are worth a small fortune." He took a sip of tea from a cup on the table and continued. "The country has a long and illustrious history, and has attracted writers as diverse as Rudyard Kipling and George Orwell. In fact, Orwell once mentioned, somewhat surprisingly, that Kipling's 'Mandalay' was his favorite poem."

"Where the flying fishes play," Ives quoted, beginning to warm to our assignment. "It sounds like a lovely place."

"Unfortunately, the country, now called Myanmar, has been under military rule for over a decade. There have been many human-rights violations."

"Will we be in any danger?" I asked.

"I hope not, Mr. Stanton. Just do your job and get out of there."

Ives ran her fingers over the robe once more. "How will this be packaged? If it's compact enough, we'd want to keep it with us on the plane."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

I thought about it. "A garment bag might be best. We could carry it on with us and it would be so ordinary it wouldn't attract attention."

"Like Poe's purloined letter," Ives agreed, but the reference was lost on Professor Bodawa.

"What airline will we be flying?" I asked.

A sigh. "Traveling to Mandalay is not as simple as one might think. I have here two first-class tickets to Calcutta on British Air-

The title of Edward D. Hoch's new story got a groan from his wife Pat, but it appealed to us as in line with a long tradition of such *EQMM* puns. Remember "10 Perfectly Executed Stories" from the 1989 cover that showed Simon Brett in executioner's garb? Mr. Hoch's story brings back his youthful and sometimes outrageous detecting duo Stanton and Ives, couriers who travel, this time, to Asia. ¶

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ways, with a brief layover at Heathrow. However, there are no international flights into Mandalay because of sanctions against the present government. Rather than send you to Rangoon for an Air Mandalay flight, I have arranged to charter a private plane to carry you from Calcutta to Mandalay. It's less than five hundred miles, a bit over an hour's flying time. The return will follow the same route, of course."

"You have the flights booked for Thursday," I said, examining the tickets.

He nodded. "Two days from now at eleven P.M. Can you be ready then? You'll need visas, but they can be obtained from the Myanmar embassy in Washington by e-mail. If you apply today, you'll have the visas by e-mail tomorrow."

For what he was paying us, we could be ready.

I'm Walt Stanton and Ives is Juliet Ives, the one with the long legs. We met as grad students at Princeton and have been together about three years now. Last year we opened our own business, a worldwide courier service operating out of a tiny office at Broadway and 12th Street. Happily, the Strand Book Store is right across the street, and when business is slow Ives can usually be found there, poring over the used books and bargains from England. I'd found her there the day that Professor Bodawa summoned us to his museum.

"Why us?" Ives grumbled, putting down a thick collection of Evelyn Waugh's travel writings. "Our security bond hasn't even come through yet."

"Come on!" I insisted. "And next time take your cell phone with you so I don't have to trot down here looking for you."

We'd hired a young woman with the unlikely name of Tillie to staff the office while we were away. When we returned from the museum with word that we'd be off to Mandalay in two days she immediately panicked. "So far away! Do you both have to go?"

Ives smiled and said, "It's a two-person job. Stanton holds the robe and I hold Stanton."

"That's how it works," I agreed. "Look, Tillie, all you have to do is take messages and open the mail. We shouldn't be away more than five days, and most of that will be plane travel. Our Thursday night flight gets us into Calcutta at five-ten Saturday morning, with the time difference, but our charter flight should have us in Mandalay by Saturday noon, delivering the robe to the museum. We'll start back Monday morning, and we gain time coming back so we should be in the office sometime next Tuesday."

"Stop!" Tillie pleaded. "You're confusing me!" Her round face took on a familiar pout. "If I'm not here when you get back you'll know I quit."

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That was about all Ives could take. "If you're not here when we get back we'll track you down and dump you in the polar-bear pool at Central Park," she said sternly.

Tillie seemed properly frightened. "You wouldn't do that in winter, would you? I could catch cold in the water!"

"Ives isn't serious," I said, trying to calm her. "Just do your job."

That night in bed Ives asked, "Do we really need Tillie?"

"We really need her till we can afford someone better."

The following day Ives went off to find some guidebooks while I packed lightly for both of us. She came back full of bad news. "What have you gotten us into, Stanton? Hardly anyone takes credit cards over there, and moneychangers only want U.S. dollars in large denominations. Even traveler's checks are difficult to exchange. Valuables, including jewelry and cameras, have to be declared upon arrival, mobile phones don't operate there, and generated power is not always available in remote areas. And no shorts or revealing clothing."

"Is that all?"

"Oh, and you can't drink the water!"

"We'll get by," I predicted. "Do they speak English?"

"The guidebook says English is widely used."

"That's all we need."

Early Thursday evening on the way to the airport we stopped at the museum, where Professor Bodawa presented us with the garment bag containing the ceremonial robe. It was a fancy bag with a little lock on the zipper. Bodawa had affixed a large sticker on one side identifying the Southeast Asian Museum. Inside, he'd carefully packaged the robe in a layer of bubble wrap to further protect it. Ives looked it over and we zipped it up. He gave us two keys, so we each took one. Then he presented us with the necessary customs documents for the robe and a letter of introduction to Thomas Orr, the museum's British director.

"Good luck," he said, shaking our hands.

The flight to Calcutta was comfortable in first class, where we found that the seats flattened out for dozing if not actual sleep. But almost sixteen hours in the air plus three hours between flights at Heathrow is a long time. We ate and watched a movie and then ate some more. Ives had brought along a paperback of Orwell's *Burmese Days* and I was reading Martel's *Life of Pi,* which wasn't about Burma but was close. Every hour or so I walked up to the rack where the garment bags were hung, just to make sure ours was still there, though in truth we could see the bag and our carry-on luggage from our seats.

In Calcutta, the Saturday-morning sky was crystal clear, with the temperature already hovering around seventy degrees. We

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hurried through customs at the airport to the private plane hangar and found our pilot, Jesse Wingate, waiting for us. He was a man in his fifties with a day's growth of stubble and a history of having flown for Air India before going into the charter business. "Flying into Myanmar is hell these days," he told us with a distinct British accent.

"We're pleased to hear that," Ives told him glumly.

"Your visas in order?"

I showed him the documents and our passports, explaining that we were transporting an item of regalia on loan to the Mandalay museum. "We plan to start back early Monday morning, if you can pick us up then."

He nodded. "Climb aboard. I'll stay the weekend and be there for you when you're ready."

Wingate's plane was a twin-engine turboprop of American manufacture. We stowed our luggage and the garment bag and settled into passenger seats in the roomy cabin. "Don't you have a copilot?" Ives asked him.

He smiled, showing a gold tooth. "Not unless you want to pay for one."

"Do you fly this route often?" I asked, seeking reassurance.

"No more than I have to. I don't like guns pointed at me."

I decided not to follow up on that remark. "Ives wants to see the flying fishes."

"Kipling!" he remarked with a snort. "They don't really fly, you know. They have expanded pectoral-fin rays so they can glide for several seconds above the water. They like warm ocean water best, but sometimes they still come up the Irrawaddy as far as Mandalay. They fly to escape their enemies in the water, but sometimes they get picked off by fish-eating birds."

He went into the cabin and closed the door, ending our conversation. "What did he mean about guns pointed at him?" Ives wanted to know.

"We'll find out in about an hour," I said, glancing at my watch. The engines were turned on and the plane taxied for takeoff.

Our flight across the Bay of Bengal was pleasant and uneventful. As we passed over the coast of Myanmar the pilot opened the cabin door. "Those are the Arakan Mountains down there. We'll be landing in twenty minutes."

Then, as the city came into view, we saw the pointed white domes of its seven hundred pagodas. Ives gripped my arm. "What a sight! Why didn't we know about this?"

"Probably because it wasn't mentioned in Kipling's poem. That's about all anyone knows of Mandalay."

Wingate landed the plane gently and taxied to a stop near the new airport terminal. The building was only two stories high, with

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no covered jetways for disembarking. Wingate shut down the engines and came back to us. "Don't be frightened," he said. "Let me do the talking."

That was when Ives and I realized armed soldiers had surrounded the plane.

Wingate opened the door and lowered the steps. Before he could descend, a uniformed officer wearing a peaked cap and sunglasses hurried to board the plane. When he saw us, he drew the automatic pistol from his holster. "You will remain in the plane," he told us. Then, to our pilot, "You have a flight plan?"

"It was filed in Calcutta," Wingate told him. "Here's a copy."

The officer glanced at it, still holding his pistol, and turned to me. "What is the purpose of your trip to Mandalay?"

"We are paid couriers," I told the officer. "Here are our passports and visas. I am Walt Stanton and this is Juliet Ives. We are transporting a Burmese ceremonial robe from New York City to the museum at Mandalay. I have all the proper papers and a letter to the museum's director, Thomas Orr."

"May we ask your name?" Ives chimed in.

The officer blinked and thought about it for a few seconds. "Captain Kyan, at your service." He returned the pistol to its holster and studied the documents. "These seem to be in order," he said finally. "But you will have to pass through customs."

"Of course."

"Bring your luggage and follow me. My soldiers will escort you."

"I don't like this," Ives whispered to me.

"We haven't much choice."

Ives and I gathered up our carry-on luggage and the garment bag, which seemed to have grown a bit lighter as we neared our destination. We strode across the tarmac surrounded by armed soldiers, past an old Fokker turbojet that had just landed, and entered a door marked *Customs* in Burmese and English. Our two bags were X-rayed, and the customs official unzipped them to feel around for contraband. We had to declare our cameras and other valuables. Next he turned his attention to the locked garment bag and I explained that it was the ceremonial robe bound for the Mandalay museum, showing him the accompanying documents.

"Open it," he commanded, fingering the lock on the zipper.

"We're delivering it to Dr. Orr at the museum."

"Open it."

I sighed and took the key from my pocket. I slipped the tiny lock from the zipper hasp and pulled it open. "That's just bubble wrap to protect the robe," I told him, but already I could feel a chill on my spine. The bubble wrap was still in place, but the red ceremonial robe had disappeared.

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"Well, it couldn't be gone," I told Ives, and she readily agreed. The garment bag had been locked during our entire trip, and it had never been out of our sight. Even on the lengthy flight to Calcutta, the storage rack had been within sight of our first-class seats. When we changed planes in London I'd carried it with me at all times, even into the men's room. The key had never left the ring in my pocket.

The customs agent stared at the interior of the garment bag. "You import bubble wrap?"

"No, no! It was wrapped around the robe for your museum celebration. The robe has disappeared."

I must have conveyed my panic at our loss, because Captain Kyan appeared at my shoulder. "This is a troubling discovery?"

"Yes, it is. The robe is extremely valuable."

"This robe was lost on its way to our country?"

"It wasn't lost, it was stolen. But I don't know how or when."

"We must contact Dr. Orr at the museum," Ives said, still keeping her wits about her.

Our pilot, Jesse Wingate, had also appeared on the scene. "Are these customs people giving you a hard time?" he wanted to know.

I explained about the missing robe. "Where can I find a telephone so we can call the museum?"

"There's one in the airport. Cell phones don't operate here," he told us.

"We know that." I didn't like the idea of my conversation with Orr being overheard so I decided to wait until we reached our hotel.

The customs agent was explaining to Ives that having declared jewelry, cameras, and other valuables upon arrival, we must produce a receipt and export permit voucher for any valuables purchased while in the country. Ives glanced at me and said, "Buy nothing we can't eat."

The police escorted us to our hotel, where I phoned Dr. Orr and told him what had happened. He said he would come directly to the hotel in thirty minutes. By now it was well past noon, and both of us were tired and hungry. Ives surveyed our room with a jaundiced eye. "Stanton, what's that thing over the bed?"

"It's a mosquito net, dear. And there's a ceiling fan, too. Didn't you ever read Somerset Maugham?"

"Are we supposed to sleep under that?"

"No, we sleep out here and the mosquitoes go under it."

She growled and punched me on the arm. "I need some food. Do you think they have room service?"

"It might be safer to go downstairs after Dr. Orr arrives."

She walked to the window and peered out at the river. "Mandalay! Who'd have ever thought we'd end up here?"

"End up is what we're going to be doing unless we find that robe."

"I'm not worried," she said smugly. "You're the great detective."

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The bedside phone rang and the room clerk announced that Dr. Thomas Orr was on his way up. Orr proved to be a tall, graying man, slightly overweight, wearing horn-rimmed glasses and carrying a walking stick. "It's a defensive weapon in this city," he explained with a decidedly British accent.

"High crime rate?" Ives asked.

"High police rate. They don't like Westerners too much, and the army is everywhere. I consider this my symbol of authority, such as it is. Now tell me what happened to the robe."

"It vanished," I told him, and went into what little detail I knew.

"We'll get it back," Ives assured him.

"Certainly the garment must be insured," Orr said, trying unsuccessfully to hide his consternation.

"Of course. For a million dollars."

"It is worth far more to us."

"We'll do the best we can," I assured him.

"I hope so." He smiled sadly. "It's a lovely city, a lovely country. I've been here half my life, but my days may be numbered now. The British community in Myanmar is virtually nonexistent. The military is in control and dissidents are in prison or under house arrest. They need only a flimsy excuse to remove me from the museum and library."

He was a friendly man and I felt sorry for him. He explained how it was his marriage to a lovely Burmese woman that had kept him in the country this long. Then, as he was leaving, he urged us to see something of the city before we departed. "You must certainly visit Mandalay Hill with its shining temple at the top."

"We'll do that," Ives promised.

When we were alone I asked, "Want to go down for some food?"

She thought about it and shook her head. "I just want to crawl under that mosquito net and make love and then sleep forever."

"That's a heck of a way to be earning our fee."

When we awakened it was early morning, just before daybreak, and the two of us had somehow become entangled in the mosquito netting. "Now I could use some food," Ives decided, freeing herself after much difficulty and not a little cursing.

"They never taught you that language in the Girl Scouts," I admonished.

"But I sold some great cookies. Come on, get up—I'm hungry!"

We were the first ones into what passed for a coffee shop in Mandalay. After eating our fill of curry and rice, hardly your ordinary breakfast dish, Ives came up with another of her wild ideas. "Let's go see Mandalay Hill."

"Fine, but is that helping us retrieve the missing robe?"

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"I think I have an idea," she said. "We'll take the garment bag with us."

"Empty?"

"Well, it'll have the bubble wrap to bulk it up a bit."

"What's that going to accomplish? The thief already has the robe."

But Ives just gave me one of her enigmatic smiles. "We'll see. The police escorted us to the hotel. If someone is watching us and thinks we still have it, they might imagine we're bringing it to Mandalay Hill for a blessing or something."

So off we went by taxi to the hill north of the city, with me carrying a garment bag full of bubble wrap. "It is two hundred and thirty-six meters to the top," our English-speaking driver told us. "The ascent takes about thirty minutes and you will pass many platforms with images of Buddha. The entire hill is sacred, so you must remove your shoes at the bottom."

When he deposited us at the foot of the hill we found ourselves facing two enormous stone griffins guarding the steps. Ives carried our shoes, leaving me with the garment bag, and we started the long climb up the sun-baked stones. A police guard paid no attention. On the way up we passed the frequent statues of Buddha our driver had mentioned, often with pilgrims at prayer. When we finally reached the top, a bit out of breath even after a couple of rest stops, we found a temple whose outer walls were covered with small shards of mirror to reflect the sun. "This is a place for the gods," Ives said with a trace of awe. The morning sun was bathing us in a blinding glare.

We'd paid little attention to our fellow climbers, mostly pilgrims who paused in prayer at almost every Buddha. When my attacker emerged from the dazzle of reflected sunlight, it happened so quickly that neither of us saw him until it was too late. Something whacked me across the side of the head and I went down hard, my vision filled with a clash of stars. I heard Ives grunt and tried to get up, then went down again.

Her voice reached me as if through a fog of mush. "Walt, are you all right?"

"I must be in heaven. You called me by my first name."

"Get up! You're not hurt."

"Try telling my head that." I tried to stand, focusing my eyes on the man sprawled at our feet. "What did you hit him with?" I managed to ask.

"Your shoe. It made quite an effective weapon. There was a second man, but he ran down the steps and got away."

"You expected them, didn't you?" I was brushing myself off, my head still throbbing, keeping an eye on the downed assailant. He stirred a bit but made no effort to rise.

"I considered the possibility," Ives admitted. "But I had to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

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"That they didn't know the robe was already gone."

I bent over and slapped the grounded man gently, trying to revive him. "He might have shot us instead of just hitting me on the head."

She motioned toward the other pilgrims and tourists on the steps. "A gunshot would have frightened people and alerted the police guard at the bottom. I figured they'd simply mug us and steal the bag."

Our attacker shook his head to clear it and sat up. "Who hired you?" I asked, but it seemed obvious he spoke no English. He muttered something I couldn't understand and then fell silent. I grabbed him by the collar and walked him back down the long flight of stairs. Going down was faster than climbing up, and at the bottom we turned him over to the police officer, explaining that he'd assaulted us and tried to rob us. He nodded and took down our names, but I had a suspicion the man would be released as soon as we were out of sight.

"All right," I asked Ives on the way back to the hotel. "What did that accomplish besides giving me a headache?"

"It proves they didn't know the robe was already gone. They thought it was still in our possession. That eliminates our pilot, Jeff Wingate, Dr. Orr, the customs people, and even Captain Kyan. They all knew about its disappearance and wouldn't have sent those men after us."

"But the real question is how anyone managed to steal the robe in the first place."

Ives gave me one of her half-seductive looks. "That part's easy," she taunted me. "I could give you the solution in three words."

"Three words? You could tell me how that robe could disappear from a locked garment bag that was in our possession, never out of our sight, even when we were on those planes?"

"Sure! It's simple."

"Tell me."

She shook her head. "First we phone Professor Bodawa in New York and tell him the robe has been stolen. He'll hear it soon enough from Dr. Orr anyway, if he hasn't already. We'll tell him two men stole it from us."

"It's past midnight in New York. Is that too late to call?"

"It's still Saturday night there. He may stay up late."

I phoned him from our room to report the theft as if it had just taken place. He'd already heard from Orr, but I explained that the robe had been recovered and then stolen again. "I will notify the insurance company on Monday morning," he told me. "They will want to question you both."

"I know. I'm sorry this happened."

"So am I. Are you bonded?"

Visions of a lawsuit loomed large. I was beginning to realize we

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could be in big trouble. "I've applied for it. We'll have to check with our bonding company and see where things stand," I answered, purposely vague.

"You'd better do that," he told me and hung up.

I sighed and turned to Ives as she came out of the bathroom. "We're in a fix," I told her. "He wanted to know if we're bonded."

"Don't worry about it."

I slumped onto the bed. "About now I could really use your three-word solution to this mystery. How did the robe disappear from a locked garment bag that was never out of our sight?"

She grinned at me. "I took it."

I sat up straight, not believing my ears. *"What?"*

"While you were dozing on the flight over, I went to the garment bag, unlocked it with the duplicate key Professor Bodawa gave me, and removed the robe. I simply rolled it up and stuffed it in the bottom of my carry-on bag. The X-ray at customs didn't reveal it, and the agent merely felt around in the bag with his hands. I'd rolled it inside-out so he didn't feel the rubies."

"Ives—"

"I know. You're ready to strangle me about now."

"Damned right! Whatever possessed you to do it?"

"Just a whim, I guess."

"I know you better than that. How'd you know rubies wouldn't show up on the X-rays?"

"I knew these rubies wouldn't show up because they're nothing but colored glass. When I was six years old I had a purse with rubies on it that looked just like them. I used to fantasize that I was a wealthy woman."

"What are you saying, Ives?"

"Why do you think Professor Bodawa hired us to deliver his million-dollar robe? We're a new young company with a tiny office, and he didn't even ask if we were bonded. Why do you think he placed a prominent sticker with his museum's name on the garment bag? Don't you see? We were sacrificial goats, hired merely to be robbed or even killed by his hired thieves."

She was right, of course. "But the insurance company must have had the robe appraised before they wrote the policy."

Ives nodded. "At that time, twenty or thirty years ago, it really was decorated with seven hundred rubies. I think Bodawa's been supporting himself and the museum by selling them off a few at a time, replacing them with glass. He could hardly admit the truth when the Mandalay museum requested the loan of the robe, so he turned it to his advantage, arranging a theft to collect the insurance. I didn't know how or when the theft might occur. I even suspected the charter pilot Bodawa hired might be in on it. So I thought it best that the robe disappear. I wanted you to show real

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surprise at customs so I didn't tell you in advance."

"I was surprised, all right. Are there no honest people left in this world, Ives?"

"Only you and me."

I shook my head. "After this trip I'm not too sure about you."

The insurance investigators were waiting for us back in New York. We presented them with the missing robe, and they saw at once that the precious rubies had been replaced by glass. It would be their decision whether to bring charges of attempted fraud against Professor Bodawa.

As for Ives and me, we lost out on the balance of our fee. But at least we had one brief shining moment that almost compensated for it. As Jesse Wingate's turboprop lifted off from the Mandalay airport and circled out over the Irrawaddy River, we saw a school of flying fish leap from the water and glide gently through the air. It was a sight worthy of Kipling. ●

The Queen Letters (continued from page 9)

Lee to Dannay (undated) on the delivery of his books following his move west: "You have never in your life seen such a holocaust. The delivery man literally poured my books out of the mailbags in which they were apparently shipped. The cartons, which I packed myself very carefully according to the P.O.'s own specifications, were all ripped and loosened, and the books took a fearful beating. There is hardly a jacket left uncrumpled or untorn. In many cases the leather bindings are discolored and stained, as if they had been exposed to dampness. . . . My leather-bound *Canterbury Tales* looks as if it had been gnawed by rats. Virtually every paperback is twisted and torn. There is scarcely a Queen foreign edition left in the original state. . . . I am frank to admit that when I began to grasp the extent of the damage I sat down and cried like a baby."

Lee to Dannay (Thursday, October 30 [1947?]): " . . . [I]f it interests you-all at-all, our roses are blooming like mad and the 'ums are lush, and there [are] buds on damned near everything. I know you're no great nature-lover, but really—you ought to see 'em! Get into your winter underwear yet? (Listen, I have to convince myself I made this move for SOME reason!)"

Dannay to Lee (March 9, 1950): "I am no longer the atheistic wise-guy I once was—I haven't been for some time now; I have had too much trouble to remain intellectually self-sufficient; trouble brings even arrogance to its knees, and in my trouble I have learned that I need help, and that the simple, basic beliefs are not so simple and are infinitely basic. I have learned that in my own way I am a much more religious person than I ever dreamed."

Between their debut in 1929 and the death of Manfred Lee in 1971, Fred and Manny may have often disagreed. But they never dissolved the partnership, and generations of readers are the better for it. ●

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BENEDICT AND BIANCA

by Alison White

—1915—

Long before they even arrived, the newspaper proclaimed they were coming to town again. Giving details of the latest tricks they had, teasing glimpses of what had happened in other places, so whipping the public into a frenzy that Benedict and Bianca drew a crowd to rival Houdini himself. Houdini might perform impossible feats and stagger the audience with his bravery, but Benedict and Bianca offered something else.

Romance.

Some said Benedict's acts of bravery were illusion, the newspaper wrote, but the love affair surely was not? The handsome, dashing Benedict, with his glossed black hair and moustache, was always there to pluck Bianca from danger. Frail, petite Bianca, with her pale skin and wild red curls. Screaming in terror as the blades approached her, fast and unrelenting, only for Benedict to bend back the blades with his bare hands, as though they were soft as butter. Yet proven sharp as a sword as droplets of blood appeared on his fingers. Then he would tear the bonds from Bianca and lift her into his strong arms, her lips forming an O of surprise as he did. Magic.

A collective sigh would infuse the audience then. Women reached for their smelling salts and even strong men took an extra breath. Relieved at Bianca's escape.

Most men fancied they fell a little in love with Bianca; they were unable to help themselves. She needed their protection, so tiny and frail, and yet so brave. Most women envied her, although they would never admit it. For she appeared onstage in little more than her underwear, with her hair in wild disarray.

Merseyside, England's Alison White last appeared in *EQMM* in August of 2001; since then she has been busy doing magazine serials in Britain, in a range of genres from Historical to Cozy Mystery. This new tale fits into both of those categories, and it takes up a perennially interesting theme to mystery buffs: magicians and the way they work their magic tricks. ¶

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Bianca by day was unrecognisable, of course. She dressed smartly and simply, in dresses with crisp collars and neat brooches. Her curled hair tamed by many pins, in a sculpted coiffure of sleek auburn. Nor was she the hapless, helpless figure she appeared onstage.

Oh, she might have the body of a woman, petite and frail, light as goose down, but Bianca had a backbone of steel, the heart of a lion, and a mind as quick and keen as any businessman. The stagecraft and professionalism shown now by the performers "Benedict and Bianca" was the result of years of work and magic study by Bianca.

It was not strength that Benedict needed to save her from descending blades, or spinning wheels with knives. That was merely for show. For Bianca was a mechanical wizard—or witch— and each device upon which she was impaled or imprisoned, she was able to stop at any time, by means of a switch within her reach.

Even "Benedict," now, didn't know how things worked. Only what was expected of him—the bending of a superfluous blade (ready blunted), or the breaking of a wheel (already split). Everything now, down to the last perfect detail, was in Bianca's control. And that was how she liked it.

Over the years, as they toured the country, Bianca had become aware of certain admirers in each district. So as not to bore, she attempted always to have a constant repertoire of new feats to amaze and delight. For why, she asked, would the audience come back if there was not something new to look at? Some new threat, some terrifying obstacle for Benedict and Bianca to overcome.

Bianca took care to look beautiful. Always maintaining the bright red of her hair, looking after her body, and using as much stage makeup as it took to create her perfect, china-doll face.

Her admirers, of course, kept their distance from the fearless Benedict, but she did receive flowers sometimes, and notes which were sent to her backstage, or even to the hotel if the more courageous of them had found out where they were staying. Some professed undying love. If she ever needed them, they would declare, they would do anything, absolutely anything, she had only to ask.

Bianca kept them all.

Any notes that were sent to Benedict now, Bianca kept those, too. Benedict, these days, was merely a stage name. As owner of the act—owner of the many Benedicts, even—it was Bianca's entitlement. The current Benedict couldn't even read. Couldn't do very much at all, except what he was told, which suited Bianca very well.

"Benedict and Bianca return, with their special brand of magic and illusion," the latest poster claimed. One illusion being, it was the third Benedict to play the town, and no one even noticed. That amused Bianca.

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The first Benedict had been Bianca's husband. In those days, the spark of romance that the audience felt between them had been real, with Bianca devoted to her husband, and trusting that he would always save her. It had been a passionate affair then, their performance charged with an eroticism that drove the relationship and led Benedict to try ever more dangerous stunts. Then, he was in charge, and there were no switches for Bianca to flick on their equipment. Then, Benedict really did pluck her from danger.

He, as were all the subsequent Benedicts, was tall, dark, and handsome. His deep brown eyes were expressive, conveying a great deal by simply the fluttering of an eyelash or the tilt of an eyebrow. To Bianca, as well as the audience, when in the act of saving her.

Despite their success, the real Benedict found their stage act boring after a while. But instead of finding new tricks, he chose another way to rekindle excitement: by leaving it later and later until he saved his wife from danger.

"It helps if they can see real fear in your eyes," he told her when she asked him why he did it. "That's what makes it work for them."

Bianca no longer liked what she saw in his eyes. It had become more than a stage show for him. Benedict appeared to bask in the applause and gasps of admiration. Not accepting that it was transitory, that they were merely a sideshow, admired purely for the few moments' entertainment they provided. No, Bianca realised that as Benedict stood on the stage and received the gratitude of the audience, he really thought he was universally adored. He was beginning to think he was invincible.

Bianca shook with fright one night as they came offstage. When they reached the tiny room where they changed, she rubbed her arm furiously, knowing she'd bruise.

"What were you thinking of?" she cried as soon as they were alone.

Benedict had pretended to struggle with the spinning wheel as it advanced towards her, and allowed it to catch her arm before sweeping her out of its way.

"Darling." He smiled, and rubbed his fingers slowly along the mark then, almost admiring it. "Your powder will cover it," he said. "A little more danger makes for good theatre. You know that, my lovely."

Perhaps. But it did not make for an easy mind for Bianca, when she had been lying there with the wheel grazing her skin and a dangerous look in Benedict's eye.

Once, Bianca had wanted children. Hoping Benedict might perform alone then, that it would help his controlling element. But he hadn't liked the idea. Not with Houdini out there. For Benedict liked to be the best, and knew he could not compete with him as a solo performer. As a double act, they were different.

"I could replace you," he said cruelly, whenever she mentioned children. "Anyone can be Bianca."

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And Benedict's cruel streak had grown. There was a show once, when they were not top of the bill, but second, to a man with a swirling cloak and performing doves. Somehow—and Bianca had a good idea how—the doves' cage was left open. Some of the birds flew into the wheel with knives that Benedict had left spinning. The others flew about in panic while the men tried to catch them.

It was not Benedict's fault, he insisted, that the dove he caught was crushed in his hands. He was not used to handling them.

Bianca remembered how the owner, their rival, as Benedict put it, had cried as Benedict released the soft downy body of the bird.

"It's only because he has to train more doves," Benedict whispered. "They're just props."

But Bianca had seen real tears in the man's eyes. And Benedict had lied. He did know how to handle things gently. Like he had her once, when sweeping her to safety. Before he'd begun to see her as a prop.

Benedict's father had been a daredevil, too, falling to his death in a horrifying trapeze accident when Benedict was just a boy. Bianca's family worked in the same circus, and she remembered how Benedict's mother had not shed many tears. In fact, few people had; he had been thought of as a cruel man. Shortly afterwards, Benedict's mother had left to join another circus, marrying one of the men who used to set up the trapeze. There had been some murmurings, but Bianca herself noticed how much happier she was. And even commented once, being shushed by her family when doing so, that his mother's skin was much paler. She no longer wore her makeup quite so heavy. Because she had no need to cover bruises since her husband died. Like father, like son, perhaps.

Benedict's father had begun to insist they perform without a safety net. His wife had argued vociferously. Anything could happen, and she didn't want to leave her children without a mother. But of course she lost the battle. To have no safety net, Benedict's father said, made it much more exciting for the audience.

The night Benedict's father died, his mother did not perform. She was ill, and for once stood up to her husband when he roared at her to go up to the trapeze as usual. Quivering with fright, she insisted she couldn't, then ran into the ring, flamboyantly introducing her husband. His face, his eyes, had said he would deal with her later. But of course, he never came down again. Perhaps Benedict's mother had known it was his last performance. That was something Bianca often wondered about later.

Sometimes as the lights bounced off Benedict's hair and moustache, he reminded Bianca of his father. Maybe she, too, should take steps to help herself. It was the only way.

That was when she began working on her mechanical devices. Not sharing them with Benedict at first. Waiting until she'd got

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them perfected with the stagehands she trusted. When she did tell him, he sneered.

"I've been wondering about you," he'd said, lifting a strand of her hair dismissively. "You're losing your nerve. But worse, my dear, you're losing your lustre. Perhaps I should find another Bianca."

Then he did, for some of her duties at least, she realised when she went back to the dressing room and caught him bedding one of the dancers.

Benedict had laughed. "I told you, you weren't indispensable."

But then neither was he.

Bianca continued to develop switch devices for their machinery. She knew if a man performing with her had the ability to move well and maintain the eye of the audience, her ideas would work. With the right timing, she could ensure that it was she who stopped the devilish machinery, whilst the strong hero plucked her to safety. She was then in control.

Benedict was handsome, true. And fashionable. But Bianca had only to look in the audience to see a hundred men like him. She just had to find one who was willing to replace him. There had never been a real Benedict, she could say. Just a series of performers to assist her.

She knew it would work. There were such stagestruck men out there, willing to assist this frail beauty they had long admired.

First, though, before "Benedict and Bianca" in their new form could continue, Benedict the original had to go. And his demise had to be less than public. Not for him a convenient fall from a trapeze like his father. Benedict's mother had been very clever indeed there.

Still, Bianca hadn't studied for nothing. She'd learned to approach a problem from many different angles. The fact that Benedict was easy to replace because he looked like so many other men of his time was a great help. It meant that when he disappeared and was eventually found, with no means of identification, he could be virtually anyone. "Benedict and Bianca" would still be performing; there would be no connection to make. Simple.

And it was. Benedict the original liked a drink. And then he liked to sleep. So, just as Benedict had held that poor little dove just a little too tight in his hand, so Bianca held the pillow over his face, just a little too hard and for a little too long. Easy.

Putting him in one of the old crates that usually held their luggage wasn't too difficult, either. She simply put an empty one by the bed and rolled him into it, having made sure there were no markings on it that would lead anyone back to her.

The next Benedict, recruited the following day, was told he was Benedict number four. Bianca spoke fretfully of a trick that had gone wrong. She'd hurt herself and could not bear to use the equipment again. The new Benedict was besotted. Overwhelmed

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at the thought of being able to be with the lovely Bianca, he did exactly as instructed and left town with the crate of offending equipment on the back of a cart to dispose of it into the river. That, Bianca assured him, was safe—for heaven knows, and her blue eyes fluttered in distress at the thought, "What if children found the equipment and played with it?"

"No one," the new Benedict assured her, "will find it now."

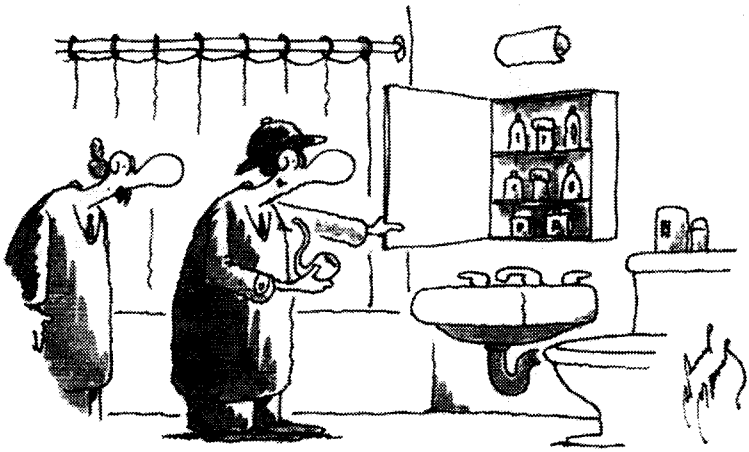
The old Benedict had always wanted to do a disappearing act. It was a delicious irony, Bianca thought, that she had finally enabled him to do it.

So, every night Bianca performed without fear of coming to any harm, while subsequent Benedicts fell in love. When they fell too deep, Bianca would explain kindly that she had to move on. They understood, because she chose them that way. Pliable. And they were grateful for the time they'd had. Bianca was, too, for she had a good heart now that it was free.

The newspaper interviewed them on their arrival in town. As ever, Bianca did the talking.

"So is it the romance that creates the excitement and magic for your act onstage?" the reporter asked.

Bianca smiled and tossed those famous red curls. "Perhaps that intrigues the audience," she said. "But what it's really about . . . is that despite everything, I've always managed to survive. That's the real magic of Benedict and Bianca." ●



"Clues? No, Watson, I just like to snoop around in people's medicine cabinets."

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Where Is He Now?

by Terence Faherty

Most premonition stories are about as newsworthy as a hot tip on last week's stock market. Let a boat sink or a plane crash and any number of people will call the nearest newspaper to report vague feelings or signs or dream warnings from Aunt Lucille that kept them from boarding. Few if any think to call when the information would actually be useful.

Walter Ashby didn't call the *Star Republic,* the Indianapolis paper for which I labor, to report premonitions of his approaching death. But when rumors of them began to circulate shortly after Ashby's obituary appeared, they so intrigued E. N. Boxleiter, my editor, that he asked me to look into it. Ashby hadn't actually spotted his end coming, as it turned out, but it seemed he knew who would be holding his left hand when death seized his right.

Terence Faherty's first story for *EQMM* featured a reporter-sleuth from the fictitious *Star Republic.* He's back this issue for the first time since 1998 in a tale that, characteristically, shows Mr. Faherty's sensitivity to the gray areas of justice. The author currently resides in Indiana, where this series is set. He was the winner, in 2003, of the prestigious Shamus Award for Best Short Story from the Private Eye Writers of America. ¶

My initial contact was the source of the intriguing rumor, a woman named Clarise O'Connor. She was a third-generation mortician whose family's business occupied a pseudo antebellum mansion in Broad Ripple, a neighborhood on the north side of Indy. At one time, the home might have had acres of manicured lawn as its foil. Now it was squeezed between a muffler shop and a consignment art gallery. A little of the old gentility survived inside the building, which looked as if it had been furnished exclusively from maiden-aunt estate sales. O'Connor's office had a modern, businesslike desk, but the piece of furniture she waved me to was nothing less than a settee, with a doily on each arm.

O'Connor herself was short and ruddy-cheeked, with a friendliness that remained even after I'd identified myself as a non-bereaved.

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"I feel like I work for the *Star Republic* myself," she began. "I talk to you people almost every day. Call in obituaries, you know, after I've interviewed the family. Not that the widow, Mrs. Ashby—Joyce—mentioned anything supernatural when I spoke with her. She just gave me the standard stuff, the deceased's age: fifty-one; profession: teacher; survivors: her. But at the viewing everybody was talking about it. Especially after Barry Clarkson himself walked in.

"You might remember him as Clark Clarkson. That's the professional name he used when he was a local disc jockey back in the 'sixties. And Clark Clarkson is the name Walter Ashby started asking everybody about a week or so before he died.

"The guy who told me about it was another teacher at Ashby's—Walter's—school. According to this guy, Walter just came in one day and asked him if he remembered an Indy deejay named Clark Clarkson who introduced a lot of the early Beatles stuff and the Stones. It was a trivia question, you know, like, 'Whatever happened to what's-his-name?' Walter said he'd just gotten up that morning with Clarkson's name in his head. He'd asked his wife about him, which she later confirmed at the viewing, though she really didn't want to talk about it.

"Anyway, over the course of the next few days Walter asked several other teachers at the school—ones of the right vintage—if they remembered Clarkson and knew what had become of him. It's funny when you think about it. When we were kids those deejays were our big celebrities, but a lot of them were barely older than we were and I'll bet none of them made much more than minimum wage."

Salaries being an uncomfortable subject for a journalist, I nudged us back to the point by asking what had happened next to the nostalgic Walter Ashby.

"What happened next," O'Connor said, "was the punch line, for Walter and the story. He's out walking one night—he was a big walker, one of those guys who pumps his arms and wiggles his hips like he's in the Olympics—and he has a heart attack. Bang, drops right down on the edge of the street. This was in Williams Creek, a neighborhood just north of here. Nice older homes.

"The guy in the nearest house comes out to help. He can't revive Walter, so he calls for an ambulance on his cell phone and stays with Walter till it gets there. The ambulance rushes Walter to St. Vincent's, but it's too late, he's dead.

"Meanwhile, the cops are making out a report and they get the name of the Good Samaritan, the guy who tried to help Walter. It's Barry Clarkson, formerly Clark Clarkson, the guy Walter's been asking everybody about. So it's like Walter had a vision of his own death, of the last face he'd see."

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It had been a very incomplete vision, as it hadn't included Ashby clutching at his own chest. But that omission didn't spoil it for O'Connor. "So that's the story that was flying around the Gardenia Room on the night of Walter Ashby's showing. But then it got better. The viewing was scheduled to run from seven till nine, and who should walk in at eight-thirty but Barry Clarkson. A couple of people recognized him even though he's changed a lot—no beard now and gray in his hair—and a hush fell over the room. You know it's gotten seriously silent when you can notice a drop in the volume of a Midwestern wake, given how quiet most of them are to begin with.

"I was greeting people that night on behalf of O'Connor's, so I stepped up and introduced myself. Barry was so sweet. And that voice. You could almost imagine that it was nineteen sixty-five again and he was announcing that 'Downtown' was the number-one song for the second week in a row.

"Somehow Barry had heard the story of Walter's premonition. And he'd made the effort to come and meet Mrs. Ashby. So I introduced them. And that was the moment. Joyce was so touched. And you could see this bond forming right away. I remember thinking, maybe Walter's premonition wasn't really about who was going to be with him when he died. Maybe it was about who Joyce was going to be with after he was gone. Maybe, without really knowing it, he was arranging for someone to take care of her."

To paraphrase O'Connor, you know it's gotten seriously sentimental when a mortician is touched, given the heavy doses of emotion they're exposed to daily. And she was touched. She glanced at the box of tissues reserved for her customers but didn't reach for it. I didn't either. I asked instead for Mrs. Ashby's address and the name of the teacher who had first told O'Connor the story.

I tracked down the teacher first, catching him between classes at a noisy Broad Ripple middle school. His name was Burris, and he confirmed everything that O'Connor had told me, and did it with a breathlessness that made the lady mortician seem like a cynic. But he also added one piece to the puzzle. As he backed into a classroom that sounded like it was full of warring cats, he admitted that he was the one who had called Barry Clarkson to tell him of Walter Ashby's premonition.

"I thought it was important for him to know," Burris said. And then, with a catch in his voice: "I thought Walter would have wanted him to know."

It was shaping up to be an interesting piece. All I needed to cap it off would be a quote from the widow and one from Barry "Clark" Clarkson. I thought about trying to get the two together, to check for signs of the bonding Camille O'Connor had spotted, but Clarkson didn't answer his phone.

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Joyce Ashby did, but when I mentioned my business she asked for time to think it over. I gave her the hour it took me to have lunch in the Union Jack on Westfield Boulevard. When I called her back using the pub's authentic English phone box, she agreed to talk with me in her home on Gladden, a quiet street off busy Meridian.

Ashby, a slender woman with olive skin and drooping features, was younger than her late husband by about ten years, I estimated, which made her very young to be an overnight widow. The continuing shock of that might have accounted for the vague, distracted way in which she greeted me and listened to my retelling of the story that had thrilled the Gardenia Room. She focused somewhat when I got to Clarkson's entrance at the wake. Focused and brightened.

"Wasn't that the nicest thing? That he should make that effort when, really, there was no connection between him and Walter. Except Walter's death. I guess anybody who tried to help someone who's dying might stop by the viewing or the funeral. But still, it was very nice."

I asked if she wasn't forgetting another connection between the two men. Namely, her husband's sudden interest in AM radio trivia.

"That's just a coincidence," Ashby said. "I mean, what else could it be? It's just a Ripley's Believe It or Not, which I really hate for Walter's sake. He had a real sense of, ah, dignity, I guess you'd say."

She turned to look at a framed studio portrait of a man with a large, put-upon nose and a 'seventies moustache, stubbornly maintained. The late Walter Ashby.

"The kids at his school teased him for it, the dignity, but that never seemed to bother him. It didn't bother him when people would honk their horns at him when he was doing the funny speed-walking he took up when his doctor told him to exercise. For his heart. But I think this might have bothered him, to be remembered as a Ripley's, an oddity. I think he expected a more dignified epitaph than that."

I asked her if she would prefer that we drop the story, and she did an abrupt about-face.

"Oh no. I can understand people's interest in it. And it may be important to Mr. Clarkson. He might like having his name in the paper again, even for something odd. Maybe it will even help his career. If he still has a career. It couldn't hurt Walter. Could it?"

The question was outside my professional expertise. So I thanked her and left.

Barry Clarkson still wasn't answering his phone, but I drove to the address I'd found with his number in the phone book. I was so close to the end of the story as I then saw it that I was reluctant to let go. O'Connor had described Clarkson's neighborhood as an area of nice, older homes, and that was no more than doing it justice. The former deejay's was a one-story of painted brick on a hillside

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given over to large rocks and ivy. I could describe his doorbell in detail, too, since I stood pressing it for some time without result.

As I descended the hill to my parked car, I noticed a woman gardening in the next yard. That is to say, I noticed her pretending to garden as she watched me. I forgot about my car and joined her in the day-lily bed, introducing myself with my press card, which was my habit with old ladies and policemen.

"You're here about the man who died in the street, you say?" she asked, removing one rubber glove so she could scratch her white head. "That was terrible. I've been kicking myself for not going out and asking him what he wanted, that night or one of the others. Or calling the neighborhood patrol to come and talk with him."

I asked if she meant she'd seen Ashby walking through the neighborhood prior to the night he died.

"Walking? I suppose he walked. I never saw a car. But it was him standing there got my attention."

I repeated "standing there" as a question.

"Certainly. Two or three nights in a row. Three nights, I'd say, counting the last one. He'd be standing there in the street staring up at Barry's house for maybe ten minutes at a time, standing very stiff like, not moving. I should have called the patrol, but—oh, there's Barry now. Alone for once."

She smiled broadly and waved, and I turned in time to see a light blue Porsche turn into the neighboring drive. I thanked the neighborhood-watch committee and hurried after it.

Clarkson must have seen me coming. He was waiting at the top of his drive and he was irritated, his look that of a man forced to deal with a telemarketer when he has both eggs out of the pan and the toast buttered. Irritated but very well preserved for a celebrity whose moment had come and gone thirty years earlier: tall and flat-bellied with thick, slightly long hair that was only graying at the temples or only being allowed to gray there.

He also had, as it turned out, what success manuals called a "winning smile." He flashed it when I drew close enough to mention my business.

"Oh, that," he said. "Come on in. When I saw you talking with Mrs. Gorman, I thought you were selling door-to-door. Nice lady, Mrs. Gorman, but she's not all there anymore. Alzheimer's or something. Real shame."

He showed me to a study on the back of the house that contained mementos from his career, the part Walter Ashby had remembered and the long years since. The glory days were represented by old photos, including one showing Clarkson with the Beatles during their 1964 appearance at the Indiana State Fair. For his post-disc-jockey career, there were awards and framed letters of appreciation from a variety of professional organizations

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and private companies.

"For my voice-overs," Clarkson said. "That's what I've been doing since I sold out in the 'seventies. Educational films, promotional films. 'Better Living Through Soybeans,' that kind of stuff. Or 'American Widget, the First Hundred Years.' Money's good, but it's very low-profile. Nothing like that night I met John, Paul, George, and Ringo out at the fairgrounds. I was somebody that night, let me tell you. Ten thousand screaming virgins in the place, and I could have taken any one of them home. I did take one or two, if memory serves."

Before his memory could serve up dessert, I interrupted to suggest that he might get a moment of his old fame back, courtesy of a dead walker.

"Yeah. That was wild, wasn't it? I mean, what are the odds of that happening? I half went to that viewing just to find out if that guy who phoned me had been pulling my leg. But the widow herself backed him up.

"She was very nice. Joyce. She seemed so touched by a little thing like me showing up. My heart really went out to her."

When I asked how he happened to notice her husband in his street in the first place, he shrugged. "Just glanced out my front window, and there he was, bent over with his hands on his knees. I would have gone back to whatever I'd been doing, but right then he just sort of tipped over. Didn't put a hand out to soften the fall or anything, which scared the hell out of me. I had nine-one-one punched into my cell phone before I even got down there, not that it did him any good. He was already gone, I think. Never said a word, never opened his eyes."

Just to get his reaction, I mentioned Mrs. Gorman's observation that Ashby had stood there looking up at the painted brick house for ten minutes or more.

"Did she say that?" Clarkson asked. For the first time, I noticed a smoothness in his baritone that reminded me of his profession. "Really? I'd hate to think he had that much warning and didn't ring somebody's bell. I certainly would have gone down to speak to him if I'd noticed him sooner.

"Then again, Mrs. G might be remembering somebody else or just making it up. Like I said before, she's not always in the here and now. For example, the night it all happened she told me she'd seen the same man in the neighborhood three nights running. But nobody else saw that. And Joyce told me her husband never took the same route two nights in a row."

Clarkson had looked at his watch several times during that speech. I took the hint and got to my feet, asking if he'd mind being photographed for the article. He handed me a black-and-white publicity shot that might have been taken that morning.

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At the door he said, "Don't feel like you have to make a big deal out of this for my sake. I turn down half of the things my agent sends me as it is. And it's not like I saved the guy's life."

I walked down to my car, but only to deposit the glossy photograph. Mrs. Gorman was still spading the dirt around her lilies. I headed her way.

"Still here?" she asked when she noticed me, which suggested that her short-term memory was doing better than advertised.

I apologized for bothering her a second time, reminding her that our first chat had been interrupted by Clarkson's arrival. Then I asked her about the comment she'd made when Clarkson had pulled in. That he was "alone for once."

She had a glove off again and was scratching away at her white hair vigorously. "I didn't mean anything by that. Not really. Barry's a ladies' man, that's all. Always has been. There's always a steady stream of them over there. Blondes mostly. Wouldn't have guessed there were that many blondes in Indiana. We've been waiting for twenty years for that stream to dry up, but it hasn't, so we all just joke about it.

"It does seem to be running a little slower, though, that stream of women. The latest girlfriend's been coming over for a solid month. For Barry, that's like making it to your silver anniversary."

I asked if she was a blonde.

"No, that's another change. She's dark, with pretty Mediterranean skin. Quite the Mona Lisa."

As it happened, I'd met a woman that day who matched that description: Joyce Ashby. I decided another talk with her was in order, but when I neared my car, Barry Clarkson came down his drive and placed himself between me and the Chevy's door.

"You've figured it all out, haven't you? I knew you had when you went back to talk with that old busybody. Come up to the house so we can talk."

I declined the invitation, feeling more comfortable under Mrs. Gorman's very watchful gaze.

"I'm not threatening you," Clarkson said. "I'm not crazy. I just want you to hear our side of it. I've called Joyce and asked her to come over. You can at least hear us out. We didn't hurt Walter, not deliberately. And we certainly didn't murder him. You can check with his doctors on that. He killed himself. He got himself worked up, and his bum heart gave out.

"All Joyce and I did was fall in love. You don't need to know where or when; that's not the issue. Somehow, Walter found out. We don't know how. He wouldn't come right out and confront Joyce with it. He hated anything like an argument. He just asked her one day if she remembered Clark Clarkson, just to let her know, like just the mention of my old name would scare her back

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to the straight and narrow. When that didn't work, he started coming by here. At least, that's the way we pieced it together after Mrs. Gorman started gossiping the night Walter died. He came three nights in a row but couldn't bring himself to knock on my door and confront me. I didn't notice him till that last night, I swear it. And his heart was already seizing up, just like I told you. He had a weak heart. Ask anybody who knew him. Ask Joyce when she gets here."

Clarkson's mention of the widow reminded me of a point that wanted clearing up. I told him I'd given Joyce a chance to kill the story and she'd passed on it. Why had she let in the daylight if she had an illicit affair to cover up?

"That was my fault," Clarkson said. "I talked her into it. I figured the more people heard that story the better it would be for us. When I first got the call about the premonition business from that guy at Walter's school, I saw it as an opportunity. Joyce and I want to be together as a couple. We're tired of sneaking around. Walter's dying was a terrible thing, but it was also our chance. Or it would have been, if he hadn't dropped dead right in front of my house. That screwed us but good. I mean, how would it look if we suddenly started seeing one another? No one would accept Walter's dying at my doorstep as a coincidence. The Mrs. Gorman Network would have been staying with that story twenty-four hours a day.

"Then I heard that Walter had been asking his friends about me. I figure he was just after my address, but the friends thought his interest was some kind of message from the spirit world. And I saw that as the perfect solution for Joyce and me. I could go to the viewing. I could be this consoling stranger that Joyce meets next to her husband's coffin. Meets through her husband's intercession, in a way."

It was the happy ending Clarise O'Connor had given the story. As Joyce Ashby pulled up and joined Clarkson in a tentative embrace, I wondered if the couple realized that their choice of a cover story would ensure that Walter and his strange death would always be with them, a memento trotted out by well-meaning friends at every anniversary. And I wondered how long it would be before they grew to hate the mention of it. I wondered, too, seeing as we were more or less standing on the very spot, whether the dying Walter had recognized Clarkson in his last seconds and been consoled by the idea that his wife, however unfaithful, would have a shoulder to cry on.

Clarkson hadn't pulled out that stop, hadn't claimed that he'd received some kind of deathbed blessing from the man he'd wronged. If he had, I might have blown the story wide open, fairy tale or no fairy tale.

As it was, I wished the couple luck and called it a day. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

FIVE TREES

by Lee Capps

A computer systems administrator by day, in his spare time North Carolina native Lee Capps works on short fiction and a novel currently in progress. This is his first professional fiction publication, but he has taught writing at college level and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Virginia Commonwealth University. He and his wife live in Richmond, Virginia, with their baby son.

The second tree, an old elm, fell soon after we moved in. The tree kept the morning light from her house, so one afternoon some men cut it down, hacked off its limbs, divided it into sections, and carted it away. As far as we knew, the elm was the only tree she'd chopped down. It was later we found out about the first tree—the guilty red maple.

My folks weren't happy. Grown trees were a neighborhood perk. They were nice to look at, increased property value, kept the house cool in summer. Around our own home grew four maples, an elm, an oak, a pine, one dogwood tree. The lot behind our house and the one directly across the street—next to our neighbor—were both undeveloped woods. The neighbors on either side of our tall spruce hedgerows kept postage-stamp yards, their properties almost entirely wooded.

Before Dad found out about the first tree, the red maple, he used to call her the Butcher. In private only, of course; we got along okay. She was a nurse at Memorial Mission, too thin, bleached blond, her shoulders always drawn up to her ears. She lived with her second son, Stuart, who was twelve or thirteen when we moved in, about four years older than me. Stuart was a tall, nervous kid, with a tangle of curls. After school sometimes, he would hang out in our basement. Dad had his woodcarving tools down there, and I had a microscope and dissecting tray. Stuart worked on a duck he was carving, or he looked through the 'scope with me at the animals that lived in the water from our gutters or from the stream in the woods behind my house. He'd stay until his mother

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got home from work, often quite late. We'd hear a tap on the sliding-glass door, and there she'd be in nurse's whites, waving and sliding open the door. She never came in, though once she did bring me a box of new microscope slides she'd taken from the hospital. She'd stand there and call to Dad across the basement: "He give you any trouble, Mr. Green?" Or, "Thanks, Mr. Green." Or, "You can send him home anytime he bothers you." And she'd kiss Stuart on the cheek, and walk home with one arm around his waist.

That's how it was. I felt sorry for Stuart. He never saw his father, hardly saw his mother, and I heard that his big brother, David, had killed himself only a year earlier.

A few years passed. Trees three and four were maples, and the Butcher had them removed at the same time. The leaves and the whirlybird seeds kept her swimming-pool filter clogged and her water the color of tea.

By then Stuart had new high-school friends, and at about this time gasoline began evaporating from our cars. One night Dad, armed with a thermos of coffee and my air rifle, sat vigil. About one o'clock, a beat-up Chevy Nova coasted up to the end of our driveway, its engine off, lights out. The passenger door opened, and Stuart lugged a five-gallon can partway up the driveway before he saw my father. Stuart dropped the can. He said, "I'm really sorry, Mr. Green." Then: "You aren't going to pop me with that thing, are you?" Dad said no, and asked him to leave. So Stuart grabbed the can and walked back to the car. The Nova started and rattled away. Dad said the point was to keep a teenager out of trouble, but at the time I thought the point would have been made more emphatically with one well-placed pellet.

That was the last time any of us spoke to Stuart.

I don't know the Butcher's reason for felling tree five, a hickory that shaded the front of her house and a good deal of the street, but it didn't go so well. My mother was driving me home from band practice one day and we found the street completely blocked by a police car, an Asplundh chipper, and trucks from Bell South and Carolina Power & Light. The hickory lay tangled in the lines like a bird in a net, the telephone poles crossed like chopsticks. We took the long way home. It was the next day before we got our power back.

Stuart moved in with his father for his last year of high school, because the Butcher thought he needed more discipline. Then she moved away. It was while the men were loading boxes onto her moving van that my father finally heard about the first tree, the tree she cut down before we moved into the neighborhood, a red maple that had stood beside the Butcher's driveway. She would have seen it every time she opened her car door.

"That poor kid," Mom said when Dad told us what he'd heard.

"All of them," Dad said, shaking his head. "That family. I mean, it's awful. It's godawful."

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I remember wondering if she was moving to a place where there were no trees. The desert, maybe: Phoenix, Reno, Vegas. Or a place with lots of trees, where she could chop and cut and saw and chop and never get to the end of them.

I was still a kid, and I thought it was all a little silly. She could have as easily blamed the chair that rocked and fell. The rope that slipped and swung. It wasn't the red maple's fault, I remember thinking. The tree had only stood there. She was the one who was late again—work-weary and too late—pulling into the driveway, opening her car door on that sad scene. Why not blame herself? I wondered. She could have as easily blamed herself. ●

On Our Cover
FREDERIC DANNAY, BSI
by Bill Vande Water

The Baker Street Irregulars, those ardent students of the life and work of Sherlock Holmes, observe many traditions at their meetings: They toast *"The* Woman," read Elmer Davis's "Buy Laws," sing the risqué "Ballad of Aunt Clara." Among the oldest traditions, begun by Frederic Dannay in 1943, is a complimentary copy of the current issue of *EQMM* for each member and guest.

Though the BSI was founded in 1934, by author/editor Christopher Morley, it was 1942 before Dannay attended his first meeting. In gratitude for an evening he very much enjoyed, he planned a surprise issue of *EQMM*. He bought a puzzle Christopher Morley had created for a Sherlockian nephew, commissioned a Sherlockian cover, and arranged to have advance copies of the magazine ready for the next dinner. When Morley questioned whether the general reader would be interested in the puzzle, Dannay replied: "Any new light thrown on the Sacred Writings . . . is of vital interest to all Devotees of Doyle and Sycophants of Sherlock. If you are still fearful, good Chris, you may henceforth consider the editor and all readers of this magazine new members of your family circle—'nephews' equally afflicted with that incurable malady 'Sherlockophily.'"

Dannay had contracted that "incurable malady" at the age of twelve. He was ill with an ear infection when an aunt brought him the library book that would change his life, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes:* "I opened the book with no realization that I stood—rather, I sat—on the brink of my fate. I had no inkling, no premonition, that in another minute my life's work, such as it is, would be born. . . . A strange rushing thrill challenged the pain in my ear. "The Red-Headed League"! What a combination of simple words to skewer themselves into the brain of a hungry boy! I glanced down quickly—"The Man with the Twisted Lip"— "The Adventure of the Speckled Band"—and I was lost! Ecstatically, everlastingly lost . . . and all the Queen's horses and all the Queen's men couldn't put Ellery together again . . . my doom had been signed, sealed, and delivered in the *Adventures.* (continued on p. 93)

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Where Mongrels Fear to Tread

by Robert Barnard

Shall we call Robert Barnard the Nostradamus of the crime short story? In August of 2004, some months after he sold us this new entry in the Svein and Loyd series, Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream" was stolen from the Munch Museum in Oslo in a brazen daytime robbery. The following tale strangely foresees the event. Munch painted several versions of "The Scream," the most significant of which was stolen, and recovered, in 1994. ¶

Svein slowed down the car as we approached Fredshavn, probably to think. Svein can't drive fast and think at the same time, and he'd said to me as we set out: "Everything has got to be done *just right*, Loyd." That was no doubt why he'd put me straight on the backseat. He doesn't mind me in the front seat if he forgets, but at other times he says it looks cutesy and odd, a dog on the front passenger seat. I can see through that sort of flannel. He's afraid people will think he's my chauffeur (which is pretty much what he is). But today, as we approached the high, wrought-iron gates, I sat there unprotesting, so that everything was *just right*.

Wrought-iron gates! you might think. I certainly did. Hardly a Norwegian touch. And that was only the start. Svein had to pull up in front of them, then get out and ring the bell on the right gatepost. Soon he was talking into thin air, then he jumped back into the car as the gates began swinging open to allow our admittance into the estate called Fredshavn. As we moved forward towards the distant white house they closed silently behind us. We could be in Martha's Vineyard or Zurich. "Great wealth walks silently," said the social philosopher dog Heidegger (fl. Trondheim 1920s). But he might have added that silently-walking money feels horribly creepy to those of us in the real world.

The hedges surrounding the estate and the little box ones in the garden were trimmed to within an inch of their lives, apparently with nail scissors. The grass was the same. No leaf, no blade was

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allowed the liberty of sprouting further than its fellows. All sign of individuality or enterprise was suppressed: all marched along like a splendidly-honed crack regiment, one body, not a thousand men. It was all very depressing.

"We're mixing above our station," said Svein. "No leaving your calling-card here, old boy."

And the truth was, I wouldn't have dared.

We pulled up on a circular drive situated outside the front door. The door itself immediately opened, and a small man in something rather like a waiter's gear slipped out.

"If you could put your car over by the stables . . . ?" he suggested insinuatingly, as if we had very nearly committed a serious faux pas. Svein nodded, drove over, then walked back to the house.

"Keep it in, Loyd," he whispered.

"If you'd come this way, Herr . . . er . . . " said the small man, whose accent was South Norwegian, but whose inbuilt (or feigned) servility was all his own. In the hall he hesitated. "The dog . . . ?"

"Comes with me," said Svein, to his credit. "He's part of the package."

"Aaah. . . . Well, if you'll come with me? . . . The family is still at *middag*. I'm sure they won't be long."

Our time had been specified, five forty-five, and we had arrived on the dot. The thought occurred to both of us that we had been intended to arrive during the family's *middag* to be kept waiting until they had finished it. We did not expect any explanation to be offered.

"I used to know police chiefs like this," whispered Svein to me as we waited in a little anteroom. "They'd give you an appointment for ten minutes before there was any chance of seeing you. Make sure you were sweating before the session even started."

It was in fact twenty minutes before the manservant came back and invited us into the dining room to take coffee with the family. He once more gave me an old-fashioned look, but I was beginning to get the idea that he was finding the situation rather humorous. When we got into the large, light, airy room, Svein pointed to a position by the door, from which I could take in the whole situation.

We were definitely mixing with our betters. The dining table was long and elegant, though only three people were eating at it. The three places had had removed all but the wineglasses and coffee cups, but those things and the central vase sparkled, sat elegantly, told the spectator how recherché and expensive everything was. Seated there, dressed formally, was a man in his early forties, a woman probably answering to mid thirties, and a girl of about twelve.

"Ah, Herr . . . er . . . um. Will you take coffee?"

He made it very clear that inviting Svein to partake of anything

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with the family, even so usual a thing as a cup of coffee, involved stooping. He introduced himself, his wife, and his daughter, and they all sat down.

So here we were, among the nearest thing the Norwegian nation has to an aristocracy: Hans-Egil Fjørtoft, ship owner, his wife Anne-Marie, and his daughter Ingrid. All three made a gesture towards making us welcome by quick, tight smiles. The daughter probably knew no better, poor thing. She would never have known anything else.

When Svein had been helped to coffee and had taken his suicidal amount of sugar in it, Herr Fjørtoft cleared his throat and began a clearly well-prepared introductory speech.

"You'll be wondering why I called you. It is not without a great deal of thought that I've done so, but the truth is, I need help of your particular kind." (He made it sound like drain clearance.) "You may not know that I—and before me my father—have built up a collection of Norwegian art over the years—" he broke off to wave a hand in the direction of a picture on the wall.

"Harriet Backer," said Svein.

Herr Fjørtoft was clearly impressed. He didn't know Svein had seen it on the cover of a "Classics of the Hardanger Fiddle" CD.

"That's my latest acquisition, bought last month. But, on my father's initiative, we've specialised in Munch. In particular, we have a very rich collection of the many variations he made of his most famous picture."

No doubt thinking to be amusing, Svein, who one can't take anywhere, opened his mouth, spread out his hands, and let out a peculiar noise. I gained the idea that the picture was called "The Howl."

"Very comical," said Fjørtoft, tight-lipped. "Yes, that picture. The number of preliminary studies and later variations on the components of that picture go into three figures." (The man obviously thought in the number of figures any deal involved—pathetic.) "We have forty-seven studies. We regard our collection as something held in trust for the Norwegian people."

Oh yes? I thought. *And how many sweaty, jeans-clad, haversack-carrying ordinary Norwegians have been asked into the house to view the collection that you are holding in trust for them?* "When someone says they're doing something for your benefit," said the revolutionary dog thinker Che (fl. Hammerfest 1960s) "go and curl up in a corner and get out your reproachful expression."

Before Svein had finished the syrupy coffee he so enjoyed, Herr Fjørtoft stood up.

"Perhaps we should go and see the collection," he said, in his lemon-sorbet sort of voice. We all began trooping out into the hall, but Fru Fjørtoft said offhandedly, "I think I'll give this a miss," and started up the stairs.

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Her husband did not react, and unlocked a door in a far corner of the hallway. We went into a small but light room whose walls were full of engravings, lithographs, ink drawings, and smallish colour pictures. All were versions of a weird-looking woman in a night landscape, her mouth open in a howl.

"As you will see," he said in his passionless voice, "there are watercolour versions, lithographs, and so on, all variations either of the central woman of the picture or of other elements in it. And we are always on the lookout for others," he went on, still curiously indifferent in his manner of talking. "There are still many such images in private hands."

"Isn't it exciting?" said Ingrid, in her breathless, schoolgirl way. "Daddy says it's one of the dominating images of the twentieth century."

"And one day it will be yours," he said without emotion.

So much for it being in trust for the Norwegian people. Since he could hardly be much more than in his early forties, that left him with thirty or forty years in control of the collection, with a like number for Ingrid later. Svein nodded, not commenting. And then he said:

"Are there any of these of especial value?"

"No. All are *quite* valuable, but their real worth is as a collection. Of course, we let Munch scholars see them, if suitable arrangements can be made and watertight references are given."

"I see. Now I think I should meet your staff, and see also the reason you have become uneasy."

Fjørtoft nodded, and led the way back to the hall. Here, though, he held back and let Ingrid take the lead, ushering us into a large kitchen, relic of the early twentieth-century lavishness favoured by Norwegian ship owners who did well out of the Great War that their homeland did not participate in. The staff were seated round the table, eating their meal after preparing and serving the family meal. There were seven of them.

"I suppose you met Mats," said Ingrid, girlish still, but trying to be grown up. "He's our butler, or major-domo, or general head man. And this is Chris Farraday, my governess and companion." She had indicated a young woman in her twenties—dark-haired, self-contained, and intelligent. "She eats here because she's trying to learn Norwegian." When Svein looked surprised, she added: "We don't talk much at dinner. . . . We're not good talkers at all. . . . And this is Vidar, our gardener, who has help from the village, of course. . . ." Vidar was in his forties, silent, capable-looking, and he nodded acknowledgment. "This is Wenche, our cook." The same age, stout, quiet, but with an incipiently satirical expression. "And there are Siri, Bente, and Gry, who are sort of maids—they'd normally be gone by this time, but Daddy asked them to stay since you were coming."

Svein nodded. "He was right. Because I need to make clear to

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you that what seems to be going on here is the work of a gang of art thieves—local, national, international." He was becoming expansive, but to my ears his tone was gaining that unconvincing edge that told me he was telling porkies, or something a lot less than the whole truth. He had been told something by Hans-Egil when he was first called in that suggested to him an inside job. "So you're not under suspicion or observation, but what I need from you is that you go about your everyday tasks, your comings and goings, in the way you've always gone about them. What *you* do may influence when the thieves decide to strike." He turned to the maids. "So today is an exception. In future you come and go in the regular way, understood?"

They nodded the glum assent of wage slaves who can't wait to get away to Bergen, Hamburg, or Soho. We went back to the hall where Fjørtoft was waiting for us uneasily. I guessed he never went into the servants' quarters. He led the way through the front door and round the house to the windows of the Munch room. He said, tight-lipped:

"I mentioned on the phone the two pictures which had been misplaced." He spoke with contained fury, like a Spanish Inquisitor speaking of an arcane blasphemy. "Then there was *this.*"

Svein examined the wood around the area where, inside, there was a latch. There were a series of random knife cuts.

"Ah yes. There seems to have been an attempt at a break-in," he said, his voice now unmistakably his lying one. What we had there was not an attempt at a break-in but an attempt to suggest a break-in. "They would, of course, have set off the security alarms if they had succeeded."

"Of course," said Fjørtoft. "One can only enter the room through the door from the hall that we used earlier, and then one must turn off the security switch just inside the door within two seconds of entering."

"How many keys are there to that door?"

"One, mine. Oh, and one in my strongbox at Bergens Privatbank. In case of an accident, or something happening when I am abroad."

"That seems satisfactory. And now, if you will allow us, Loyd and I will walk around the grounds to see all possible means of access to the property."

"Is that necessary? Fredshavn is extremely secure."

"So was the National Gallery in Oslo," said Svein. Fjørtoft looked taken aback, but he departed bad-temperedly.

"Ha! Got him there, didn't I, old boy? That was where the oil painting of 'The Scream' was stolen from in the nineteen nineties."

So it was "The Scream," was it? I preferred my version. More canine, more desperate. As we walked around, Svein talked, as usual.

"Cold old house, isn't it? Cold old household, too. It's like going for a stroll in the Antarctic. You hear the ice floes crack and the

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icebergs collide. Not much fun growing up in a place like that. Or being the wife, either, come to that. It's as if Fru Fjørtoft had had a general anaesthetic or two, and not completely come out of them. Funny lot. Not really of this world. They think we accept that it's an outside job, but we don't, do we, old boy? Of course the obvious one to suspect is Hans-Egil himself. Staging a robbery to collect the insurance. Nobody goes by ship these days, do they, apart from cruises. Maybe the firm is on the rocks. . . . Hello, what's that?"

I had seen him already and nudged Svein's ankles. It was a young boy, maybe twenty, who was cutting away ruthlessly at a young tree. Svein turned on his heels and walked back to the house. He poked his head through the windows of the large kitchen and beckoned to Mats, the butler.

"Who's that boy I saw working over towards the east corner?"

Mats scratched his head. "Boy? Oh, that will be Semyon. One of these asylum people. Come from Chechnya or some such place. Works in one of the Bergen parks, and as a part-timer with us. Sleeps in the old stables."

"Why didn't you mention him?"

"Didn't cross my mind, to tell you the truth. He can't speak Norwegian or English so he doesn't communicate with any of us. Just comes and collects whatever he's going to eat, and takes it back to the stables."

"Right. . . . Well, we're off to find out what we can about recent art thefts."

Svein raised his hand and turned towards the car.

"Poor young Semyon," he muttered. "Oliver Twistsky. And even Oliver had a few mates to talk to."

We'd seen the TV version. I thought Bill Sykes's dog was a bit of a prat. Fancy throwing yourself off a roof for a man! We got into the car and drove to the gates, which opened for us. Svein drove about a quarter of a mile on the road towards Bergen, then drove the car into the shelter of a coppice and we trudged back towards the gates of Fredshavn and a collection of hillocks and minor plateaus on the other side of the road. Svein selected one nicely shielded with trees, and we settled down with a pair of binoculars and kept our attention fixed on the distant white wooden house—not cosy and welcoming, as most of them are, but cold and antiseptic.

"One room lit up at one end of the first floor, another room lit up at the other end of the same floor. Bedrooms? I rather fancy they could be suites—plenty of space for *two* rooms each side. . . . Ah, there's Hans-Egil, if he'll allow the familiarity. . . . Damn. Can't see him, but I'd be willing to bet I know what he's doing. . . . Yes, see how he's holding his arm. Crooked with the hand a bit below nipple level. . . . Yes, that's definitely a glass he's holding. And it is now precisely seven forty-five."

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Svein was enjoying himself. Ten minutes later the fragrant but near-silent Anne-Marie was similarly to be seen at the other end of the first floor, fetching herself liquid refreshment. We watched for two hours, and she renewed her glass three times, her husband four. We both left for home, well satisfied with our night's work.

Over the next few days we reported back regularly to Fredshavn. We seldom saw Anne-Marie Fjørtoft, but if the master of the house was about his shipping business we left messages (but not about things of any importance) with Mats, Ingrid, or the governess. Around Bergen we made enquiries, Svein using his old police connections, about art thieves, the fallout from the Oslo Munch theft, and, very discreetly, about the Fjørtoft fortune, which, disappointingly, seemed to be doing very nicely thanks all the same. From time to time we saw Semyon, the asylum-seeker from Chechnya, working in one or other of the parks.

"Time to keep an eye on him," said Svein, when a fortnight had gone by and we felt things were returning to normal at Fredshavn, after the disruption of our appearance there.

Keeping an eye on him was very easy. He did his work, talked to no one except his supervisor, ate from a packet presumably prepared at Fredshavn, and, after four-thirty, caught the bus back there. We were disappointed, and bored, after the first two days of watching him. The third day, Wednesday, however, was obviously his half-day. After work he walked to a photocopying shop in Kong Oscarsgate, went in, and stayed there for over an hour. He was carrying a small bag, such as he had with him every day, and when he came out we couldn't detect by his walk that it was significantly lighter or heavier. He went to the bus station and caught an early-afternoon bus back to Fredshavn.

"It's odd, the whole situation," said Svein. "I wouldn't have thought the Fjørtofts were the sort of charitable people with a soft spot for asylum-seekers. Cheap labour is why they employ him, I would have thought. Always unwise for rich people to do that."

Every day, at different times, we made sure we were seen around Fredshavn, but not too conspicuously. We went to the Munch room, with Hans-Egil's key, inspected the security, noticed no change in the prized contents. I still thought she was howling ("Bitches howl before you've even got a good bite in"—the masculinist dog Hemingway, Stavanger 1960s).

We swapped words with all the servants, indoor and out, with Ingrid and her governess-companion. That last, with the discretion of her kind, told us the Fjørtofts had been "very kind" to her. We didn't seek interviews with the ridiculously buttoned-up Hans-Egil, but we left him a report every couple of days. Anne-Marie seldom appeared. Either she was participating in a social round, or she was "indisposed." In bed with a bottle, that meant, most likely. I

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must admit I don't really *get* alcohol. Svein says it has the same effect as catnip on felines, but I never notice them totally insensible and gone to the world for hours at a time. More's the pity!

Svein was just forming an action plan, which would probably have failed dismally, when we were suddenly handed a missing piece in the jigsaw, though Svein, inevitably, was too slow on the uptake to take advantage of it. We were driving through Lille Lundegårdsvann, slowly following Semyon on his way to the bus station, when I saw emerge from the art gallery called the Rasmus Meyer Samling a leggy blonde with hair stretching down to her shoulders in gorgeous profusion, wearing a sleeveless, above-the-knee frock that showed off her fashionable slimline figure. I blinked . . . I knew . . . surely I knew . . . I blinked again.

I was in the backseat at the time. I put out my right paw and scratched, scratched, scratched Svein's back.

"What's up, boy? Not feeding time yet."

Of course it's not bloody feeding time yet! I went to extreme measures, brought both paws into play and bang-bang-banged them both into his back and gazed intently through the window.

"What is it, Loyd? Yes, she is a smasher." (Svein's slang is very dated.) "Bit out of my league. You know I'm past all that."

Oh, I knew it. And so did his ex-wife, and her bus-driver lover. I gazed through the window, whined, and let out a tremendous howl.

"Yes, you like her, too." She was now only a few yards away from the car. "Wait a minute. . . . That face rings a bell. . . . But it can't be!" I barked applause. "That's Ingrid Fjørtoft!"

She turned off into a one-way street, and it wasn't our one way. We drove round in a square to pick up her traces, and coasted round the area for over twenty minutes. Well done, Svein! You really are quick on the uptake!

So we'd established that things in the Fjørtoft household were not quite what they seemed. I did rather fear that Svein was going to misunderstand seriously the matter of young Ingrid, but I had to admit that he made a sensible decision: to clear up the subsidiary matter of the monkey before going seriously all-out to catch the organ-grinder. He rang the central office of the Fjørtoft shipping line, asked for a meeting with Hans-Egil the next day, and was told that he was always in Oslo throughout Wednesday, sometimes into Thursday morning. So Semyon's half-day coincided with Fjørtoft's day in the Oslo office, freezing the computers into meltdown and the firm's secretaries into chastity. Maybe a coincidence, but maybe organised by Semyon in whatever language (sign, perhaps) he used to communicate to his bosses in Bergen.

The next day was Wednesday, and it was a doddle. Everything went as in the previous week, except that after Semyon, again clutching a small bag, had been in the premises in Kong Oscars-

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gate for ten minutes, Svein and I followed him. He was not in the outer office, but Svein marched straight through to the inner one (Bergen people are not used to crime or its detection, so he did it with only a minor squawk of protest from the girl on the desk), and there all the elements were: Semyon, a drably-dressed Russian-speaking operative, a large but impressively businesslike machine, and—still in its frame—an ink-and-colour version of several of the faces from Munch's pictures: top-hatted men and bonnetted women from his picture of Karl Johansgate, within the swirling landscape of "The Scream."

Semyon immediately and at enormous speed started explaining in Russian, Chechnyan, or something. The operative held up her hand to him and immediately turned to us and started to explain in prim, textbook English.

"I will explain. What you are seeing here is the most up-to-date process of reproduction, developed in Moscow, which can make a copy of a picture or a document which is indistinguishable, except to experts, from the original. The process is called—" But here she broke off. Svein and I would certainly not have understood a word of her explanation, but she was in the grip of a Western commercial paranoia. "I will not explicate further for reasons of commercial confidentialness. In Russia, misfortunately, is much thievery from museums and galleries, and today we are using very much this process to provide visitors with perfect copies to keep safe the precious originals."

"I see," said Svein. "But this picture—"

"Does not come from a museum, no. We are expanding our operation into Europe and America to provide service to museums and private collectors. I receive phone call from Mr.—is difficult."

"Fjørtoft?" suggested Svein.

"Exactly. It was from this Mr. Something's secretary. He want our perfect copies of his entire collection of Munch lithographs, watercolours, oils, and cetera. One will be brought each week until the collection of copies is complete. I ask for signed authorisation and some payment in advance, and she send it. This one is the seventh I undertake."

"The seventh. I see. And the secretary's name?"

"Is Miss Olsen."

"I see. A common name. However, not the name of anyone in Herr Fjørtoft's employment."

She looked, or perhaps pretended to look, surprised. She offered no resistance when Svein, having pointed out that she'd been duped and should have checked the authorisation and signature, removed Semyon and his framed Munch to the car. He phoned the University Russian Department, asking them if they could provide a student interpreter. We picked him up in the car, and then

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began the drive out to Fredshavn.

I have to say that Svein was doing rather well so far. The boy was learning, obviously from working all the time with me. With time he could make a perfectly competent assistant. However, his conversation in the car—not greatly helped by the Bolshie interpreter, who was obviously convinced that Svein was setting the boy up in order to get him expelled from the country—got nowhere very interesting. It was only when we arrived at Fredshavn and went through the ridiculous business with the gates that he really got to the nub of the matter.

"So this was simply a matter of getting paid to do the job," he asked him. "Who paid you?"

"The teacher," said the interpreter after consultation.

"And did she act as the go-between with the pictures?"

Again there was an incomprehensible discussion.

"No—it was the younger one."

"Ah, the young one," said Svein.

"The younger one."

We were coasting through the nail-scissored lawns towards the facade of the house when I saw some way away, under a cherry tree I itched to water, Anne-Marie. She was talking to Vidar, the main gardener. Body language did not suggest they were talking about topsoil or slug control. Good for her, I thought. She's found a way out of the icebox.

We were met again by Mats, the major-domo, at the front door, and Svein asked if the whole household could be assembled in the dining room.

"You mean the servants?" Mats asked, frowning. "I'm not sure that Herr Fjørtoft—"

"I mean the whole house, family and servants. I believe Herr Fjørtoft is in Oslo, so what he doesn't know—"

Mats looked as if what he didn't know usually didn't remain unknown for long, but he nodded. I was rather surprised when he went out onto the steps and with a gesture summoned Anne-Marie and Vidar to the house. No prizes for guessing who was the freezer of the household, and why everyone was so much more relaxed when he was not there. Svein dallied for a moment, let Anne-Marie pass into the house first—quite the gentleman—and then he went in himself with the gardener. We and he both qualified as "outside help," I suppose.

They all sat around the table, looking at us. Svein fetched a couple of chairs and set them by the door for Semyon and his interpreter. We stood there for a moment by the door, looking at the household: all female, apart from Mats and Vidar. Chris Farraday, the governess, was smiling a secretive, confident smile. Ingrid was less sure of herself, on the surface, but she gave encouraging

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smiles to Chris. I flopped down on the floor with a truly canine sense of drama. Now, after I've done all the hard work, I seemed to be saying, it's all up to Svein.

"I've brought you all here today," said Svein, "because there's been an important development in the matter of the Munch pictures, and I think you all ought to hear about it. I have discovered that your assistant gardener from Chechnya—" he gestured towards the door—"has been taking pictures from the Munch room in to Bergen, to a firm which offers an unusual service: a new and revolutionary process developed in Russia to provide near-perfect copies of pictures and documents—copies that only prolonged and intensive inspection can distinguish from the real thing." There was a buzz of conversation, and much looking at Semyon. Only Anne-Marie looked bored: the body-language said that she'd had it up to *here* with Munch. "I may say that I have no evidence of Semyon—I won't attempt the surname—of Semyon's involvement other than as carrier. He was paid a small sum to take the pictures backwards and forwards. Paid by Miss Farraday here."

"So he says," said Chris Farraday, apparently unperturbed.

"Exactly. But I think it would be much easier for you, Miss Farraday, to gain admittance to the collection. I have not heard of Semyon going anywhere in the house other than the kitchen. Mostly he's kept out in the stables."

"We used to say the attics were for mice and the North Norwegians," said Anne-Marie, suddenly waking up. "Dear Hans-Egil goes one step further for asylum-seekers.'"

"Ah!" said Svein, quite eloquently. "Now Semyon also says that the pictures to be copied were conveyed to him by young Ingrid here. If he's telling the truth, that is very serious: the governess using her underage pupil as part of a plan to gradually rob the family of its very important and valuable collection."

I stirred uneasily. Anne-Marie started to say something, but her eye was caught by her daughter, standing up at her place around the table.

"This is too silly," she said, standing tall and losing all trace of girlish manner or lack of confidence. "You followed me the other day, didn't you? I slipped into a dark doorway and saw you driving round and round Bergen's one-way streets. You'd think an ex-policeman could do better than that, wouldn't you? In fact, you were generally a little bit bamboozled. You thought you were following a schoolgirl dressed up as an adult in stuff from her mother's wardrobe, didn't you?"

"Your governess's wardrobe, more like," said Svein sourly.

"Neither. You see, when I'm in fancy dress is when I'm here, being Daddy's little girl." She put her hands up to her chin in a girlish gesture and fluttered her eyelids at us. Even Svein realised that while

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she had been talking she had been growing before our eyes into her real age. "You see, Daddy has a problem—Boy! Does he have a problem! He only fancies little girls. Mummy had me when she was fifteen, though they were married in Thailand and have always lied about her age here. Mummy's problem has been the same as mine: She's grown up. I seem to have gained about a year since I was eleven, though that was six years ago now. Daddy's been so *awfully* careful of me, *so* keen on shielding me from premature adult experience. Pity he didn't realize that Chris and I were discovering an adult relationship he hadn't even considered a danger."

She stood before us, a young woman in girl's clothing, a sort of goddess of revenge, her eyes glinting, her face glowing with a long-delayed satisfaction at being who she really was. She went and stood behind Chris, her hands on her shoulders, proudly, and she suddenly gave the impression of being in reality the dominant partner.

"And do you know," she said, "just as exciting as finding out who I was and what I wanted, was the knowledge that Chris had done her degree at Middlesborough University on 'The Economics of Art.' All the money side was child's play to her."

A car drew up outside. Her father got out and strode towards the house. Ingrid left her place and went towards the door. When it opened she threw her arms around her father's neck, a schoolgirl again.

"Hello, Daddy! It's lovely to have you home! I'm just telling all the people here about our little games together—all the funny little things you do to me. Of course, I know it's always been our own precious secret, but I think most of them could guess, don't you, when I was never allowed to grow up. And of course I had my own little game, that you never guessed about: slipping into your room to get the key to the Munch room at night when you were drunk to the world. This nasty man has accused me and Chris of stealing the Munchs, when really I was only taking payment for all my services rendered. Payment that will finance my life with Chris."

She looked at him triumphantly. At the table Anne-Marie's hand was clutching Vidar's. For a moment Fjørtoft's face was absolutely and characteristically blank. Then, unnervingly, he sank to his knees and started to blubber. It was a horrible sound, like a little boy refused a second helping of *rømmegraut* with currants. Svein watched for a moment, then went over and spoke close to his ear.

"What you do now is up to you. Call the police or hush it up, it's your choice. Hushing it up will be more expensive, but calling the police will be nastier. I shall be sending in my bill, and it will be large."

Then he beckoned to Semyon and his interpreter and we went through the hallway and out of the front door. In the fresh air the interpreter went straight to the car. Semyon thought for a

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moment, then went towards the stable. I think the interpreter had been translating all that had been said into Russian, and he sensed he might be on to a good thing.

I stood for a moment or two. The last time I had had a pee had been outside the photocopying shop. I raised my leg beside the doorframe and out it came. On and on it went. On and on. My bladder was very full, but I think I was also making an existential statement: The harder you push the plug in on Nature, the more it will look for a way to burst exuberantly forth.

I jumped into the front seat of the car and we drove towards town.

Frederic Dannay, BSI (continued from p. 80)

He finished the book convinced he had "read one of the greatest books ever written." In the same essay he adds that in "the mature smugness of my present literary judgement, I still consider *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* one of the world's masterworks."

Dannay has become so well known as a scholar and collector that it is easy to assume he viewed the Holmes stories solely in those terms. It is true that one of his primary interests was the place of the stories in the genre and their influence on its history. But as readers of the Queen novels soon learn, the first solution may not be the only one. Dannay was also an avid fan—a Sherlockian—and, at times, a serious player of the "Holmes really lived" Irregular game. Scholar and Sherlockian combined to produce the classic 1944 anthology of pastiche and parody, *The Misadventures of Sherlock Holmes.* (The Irregular stepped in to preface his own piece in the book, a radio play on the unsolved case of James Phillimore, with a letter to Holmes himself, apologizing for bringing up one of his failures.)

To celebrate the simultaneous publication of the *Misadventures,* Edgar Smith's *Profile by Gaslight,* and Christopher Morley's *Holmes and Watson: A Textbook of Friendship*, a special "trilogy" BSI dinner was held in April 1944. A *Life* magazine photograph taken at the dinner shows Dannay about to inject himself with an enormous hypodermic. And he was soon to need a "seven percent solution" of something; not everyone was as pleased with the *Misadventures* as he was. If calling the stories "Sacred Writings" was an in-joke to Irregulars, it was literal truth to Adrian and Denis Conan Doyle. Sir Arthur's sons considered parodies sacrilege, and objected to pastiches as diluting the estate's income. They forced the withdrawal of the book in 1945. Another photograph from that dinner, reprinted on this month's cover, shows a deerstalkered Morley beside Dannay.

The 1946 BSI dinner started a classic Sherlockian year. Manfred B. Lee, the other half of the Ellery Queen writing team, attended the dinner with Dannay, for the first and only time. The first issue of the *Baker Street Journal* appeared, with Ellery Queen listed among the associate editors. (The fourth issue would reprint a letter on Sherlockian elements in the Queen novel *The Tragedy of Y.)* Finally, the first of the Queen's Awards anthologies was published, including Irregular Bliss Austin's story in which (continued p.134)

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911

by Michael Z. Lewin

Leroy Powder was not a happy bunny. Not only was he not a happy bunny, he wanted to let everybody know it. So underneath his unbuttoned uniform he wore a T-shirt with the legend "Not a happy bunny." Above the words was a drawing of a rabbit that was looking, well, not happy.

A uniform unbuttoned was breaking regulations — not something Powder would normally entertain—but there were times when a man in charge of other men must put his head above the parapet and take a stand. Even a turtle makes no progress unless it sticks its neck out.

There are three novels in the series to which Mr. Lewin's new story belongs. Series protagonist Leroy Powder is, as the author puts it, "not, by and large, a nice fella . . . but some people like [him]. He was my mother's favorite character of mine." There hasn't been a new Powder novel since the '80s, but there *is* a new book in his Albert Samson P.I. series, the first in 12 years. See *Eye Opener* (Five Star, 12/04). ¶

"Nice tee, Lieutenant." The comment was from Jimmy Halton, a young officer Powder rather liked. Halton was heading for the assembly room—ten minutes early, good. He was in the company of an unknown female officer.

Powder grabbed Halton's arm. "I think the unhappy-bunny logo should be a sew-on for all IPD officers to wear on their uniforms."

"Oh yeah?"

"Because a happy cop is not an alert cop. Whatcha think?"

As Halton took a moment to think up an appropriate response, the female officer stepped back, as if she couldn't believe the conversation she was hearing. "You got a problem?" Powder said to her.

"No, sir."

"Who are you?" Though the woman's name was clearly visible from her nametag.

"Lisa Solento, Lieutenant."

"What are you here for?"

"I'm on loan from Southside for five nights. I was told you're short of personnel."

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"Not wrong about that," Powder said. "Where's your paperwork?"

Solento indicated the office she and Halton had just come from and to which Powder had been headed. "Waiting for you. Sir."

So, the dummies downtown actually got off their butts and sent him someone. He only needed a dozen more. Powder couldn't think of anything bad to say, so he said nothing, left the two officers, and continued on his way.

Solento's paperwork was waiting in the office as advertised. The senior of two civilian aides, Juanita Spondelmyer, held the file up for Powder without being asked. "You'd make someone a lovely wife," Powder said.

"I do," Spondelmyer said.

Powder thumbed the papers. Everything was in order. Solento was only a year off probation—no doubt she won the Southside sash for Most Expendable Officer of the shift, which is why they'd dropped her on him. Well, Powder didn't mind his officers unformed. He'd see what he could do to send Solento back a better cop than when she'd arrived.

He gave the papers back to Juanita. "Anything else for me?"

"That's it, Roy."

Teaching his charges to be better cops. As Powder saw it, that was his main job as a shift lieutenant. To leave a legacy of better cops out there trying to make Indianapolis safe for the law-abiding, even if not necessarily tax-paying, citizenry.

A buzzer sounded. Through a one-way-glass partition Powder saw a member of the aforementioned citizenry waiting for attention in the foyer that connected the station to the outside world.

Not many people came to police stations these days. Mostly they called. Or e-mailed. The North Quadrant station was primarily a mustering point for shifts and a site for preliminary interrogations. And a place for people to report, if their bail conditions required it.

But the buzzer didn't look like she was on bail. She just looked old.

The woman buzzed again, three quick sharp bursts. Juanita Spondelmyer rose from her chair, but Powder waved her back. "I'll get it." He buttoned his tunic, passed through a security door. "Ma'am? May I help you?"

The old woman wore a velvet hat in squares of different colors and a black coat. She hung her cane over the counter edge and said, "I want some service, young man."

"That's what we're here for."

"Connie Cornly isn't answering her doorbell or her telephone. I must have rung both a dozen times."

"Ms. Cornly is a neighbor of yours?"

"You worked that out for yourself? Of course she's a neighbor of mine. Who else would she be? And she's a frail old bird. She could

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be lying inside her house on the floor dying, or already dead." The old woman waved a finger. "And before you weigh us down with your paperwork, my name is Mrs. Lureen Twalken. I've been a resident of this city for sixty-six years. I live on Forty-first Street east of College and Connie is two doors down from me. The family in the other half of hers wouldn't notice a neighbor if you put a note on their door. So what are you going to do about it?"

Powder took a telephone from beneath the counter. "I'm going to dial nine-one-one."

"If I'd wanted nine-one-one, I could have dialed it for myself."

"If your friend is lying immobile in her house . . ."

"Well, I don't know that for sure, do I?" Mrs. Twalken banged her cane. "And we're forever being told not to dial nine-one-one frivolously."

"Even so."

"Think it through, young man. If I call out an ambulance they'll break the door down. What's the point of that if Connie's all right? But you, being a policeman, you will know crafty ways to break into the house. We'll dial nine-one-one once we know for sure." She took her cane from its resting place. "Come along."

"I can't come with you now."

"Even if an old woman's life may hang in the balance?"

Powder picked up the telephone receiver. "Make up your mind, Mrs. Twalken."

"Don't get fresh with me, young man. So when can you come?"

"If you leave your address I can send someone over . . ." He checked his watch. ". . . in about thirty-five minutes."

"And that's your best offer?"

Powder said nothing.

"It'll have to do then, I suppose." Mrs. Twalken sighed deeply.

"What's your house number?"

She gave it and looked at her wrist watch. "Thirty-four minutes. I'll be waiting."

Powder stood outside the assembly-room door and undid the buttons necessary to show his T-shirt again. As he entered, five of the six officers there held their two index fingers behind their heads and wiggled them. Only Solento did not participate in the leporine greeting.

Powder didn't get it for a moment.

Helpfully, Halton said, "Bunny ears."

"Oh." The young officer had spread the word. Well, good. Powder sat and opened his notebook. "You should all be unhappy bunnies."

"Why's that, Lieutenant?" Lennie Weitz, ten years on the job, though he sometimes made elementary mistakes about evidence.

"Because this is all of you there are. And only four in the Second Roll Call."

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"Where is everybody?" Weitz asked, but before Powder said anything a couple of the others said, "Flu."

"Flu," Powder repeated, his tone dismissive.

"I stopped at Howie Jones's house to pick him up," Weitz said. "He's in *real* bad shape. He's hurtin'. He ain't fakin'."

"Nobody said they were faking," Powder said. "But when I had the damn flu, you didn't see me sitting at home."

"You probably the one gave it to everybody, Lieutenant." This was Daniela Ortega. Only a fifth as long on the job as Weitz but five times better.

"Didn't everybody have a flu shot?" Halton asked. "I had a flu shot."

"I heard the shots we got don't fit the flu that's going around," Ortega said. "One of the biggest drug companies in the world and *that* happens."

"Flu is just flu," Powder said. "Nobody ever died of it."

"I think they did," Weitz said. He looked to his colleagues. "Didn't they?"

"Not on my shift, they didn't," Powder said.

"The lieutenant, he think if he come in, they should come in." Roddy Olson, a young officer who joined up as soon as he was old enough, family footsteps. "But he don't appreciate how normal cops don't got the constitution he got."

"I'm nothing special," Powder said. "And that is the point."

"Oh, you *are* something special, Lieutenant," Daniela Ortega said. "Don't you doubt that for a minute, sir." All the room laughed, except Powder and Solento.

"I'm not complaining about you guys," Powder said. "You're here. But the Northside has never been so thinly patrolled as it will be tonight. Each of you is on all or part of at least three sectors. Think about it. Be better cops. You get an incident. You call for backup. One or two other incidents occupying your fellows at the same time—"

"And we're screwed," Lennie Weitz said.

"Metaphorically, yes," Powder said.

"Speaking screwed," Olson said, "also metaphorically, who is the newbie, Lieutenant?" He turned to Solento, who was at the table next to his. "Rodrick Olson. Yes, *the* Rodrick Olson, the first. Howdja do." He leaned toward her and stuck out his hand.

Solento shook it, but it was Powder who spoke. "Officer Lisa Solento is on loan to us from Southside. She's probably too modest to say so, but three months ago she was awarded a commendation for subduing an armed robber in a liquor store single-handed."

"More than enough to handle you, then, Roddy," Weitz called.

"Any time, honey." Olson dropped back into his seat to the accompaniment of cat calls.

"Officer Solento," Powder said, "is the only supplemental man-

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power the Wise Men and Women Downtown have deigned to give us this week, despite the dangerous nature of our situation." He pointed to the unhappy bunny on his chest.

"Where would they come from, Lieutenant?" Halton asked. "The flu's bad all over town."

"That's not my problem, but it is their job," Powder said.

"Schools have substitute teachers," Weitz said. "How about substitute cops? Retain guys who've retired so's they can fill in when we're short of manpower." He turned to Solento. "And womanpower." He raised a fist. "Sis-tuh!"

"I wouldn't take retired guys on my shift," Powder said. "You either want to be a cop or you don't."

"Lieutenant, if it's only us and the four on Second Call, do you want us to do things different from a normal night?" This was Sammy Rolleson, a sergeant, who'd been atypically quiet so far. He'd taken Powder aside when he came in, to confide that he wasn't feeling well. Powder, however, figured Rolleson's problem was being on the brink of divorce rather than anything infectious.

"Good question, Samuel." Powder opened the question to the floor. "Think it through, guys. Be good cops. What should our approach be tonight?"

"We could drive around faster than usual so the same number of citizens see a patrol car." Olson.

Response to this included racing-car sounds from Weitz.

"Or keep sirens on so we'd have more presence." Olson again.

Then Ortega said, "We *could* use the situation to study the impact our normal patrolling really has, Lieutenant."

About thirty, Ortega hadn't been out of the academy all that long, having applied to join the force only after her high-school marriage failed. When Powder asked her why it failed, she said, "Come on, Lieutenant, these days everybody's entitled to a practice marriage." And at least Ortega had avoided having children. "Rudy was child enough for anybody," she said. Almost every time Ortega opened her mouth she said something that made sense, whether Powder agreed with it or not. She was smart and, more important, she had judgment. She would make a good cop. She was halfway to being one already. "How do you mean, Danny?"

"There's no way we'll make a significant visible presence tonight, right? So let's not patrol at all. That way we could trial whether visible presence makes any difference to the crime rate. Has anybody ever tested it? Maybe seeing us out there on the streets has no effect at all on the bad guys. Or maybe it just lets them know where we are so they can be someplace else. We don't *know,* not for sure. So tonight we could park up, different places scattered around the quadrant. Respond to calls, of course, but otherwise stay put."

"Yeah!" Olson said. "One car at every Dunkin' Donuts."

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"I prefer Krispy Kreme," Halton said.

"Interesting suggestion, Ortega," Powder said. "But your experimental design lacks a control group."

"I'm with you, Lieutenant," Weitz said. "Driving around helps keep us awake." This was from the officer who would be, by default, the oldest on patrol tonight. Not, however, the most mature.

Oldest apart from Powder himself. Powder was older than everybody. "What will we do to be good cops?" he asked rhetorically. "Give every assistance possible to members of the public. That's what good cops do. You'll patrol as usual, though you can go easy on routine traffic stops. The key here is to prioritize. Be careful about getting involved in anything you can't leave quickly if a fellow officer needs backup. I just hope none of you has to die to make the Wise Men and Women Downtown wake up to their responsibilities. That's it, guys. Off you go. Except Solento."

As the rest of the officers filed out, Lisa Solento moved to a place by Powder's desk. "Sir?"

"Know the Northside, do you, Solento? That why they sent you to us?"

"Not real well. Sorry."

"Didn't spend your teenage nights clubbing at the Vogue, or prowling Thirty-eighth Street, or—"

"I grew up in a little town outside Kansas City, sir. I moved to Indianapolis with my husband about three and a half years ago and applied to the academy then. I know the Southside pretty well now, but we live in Southport."

"Great."

"I have a city map."

"Great."

"Look, Lieutenant, I didn't ask—"

"And I didn't answer." Powder passed Solento a slip of paper with Lureen Twalken's name and address on it. "See if you can find this with your city map." He looked at his watch. "You have seven minutes."

Once Second Roll Call was finished, Powder followed his officers to the lot. On a normal night he would have dealt with administrative matters before coming out to patrol. He might have chatted with Juanita Spondelmyer, to underline that he knew her work was important to effective policing. He might have taken a few minutes to have coffee from his flask—the so-called coffee produced by the station machine was awful. He might even have looked through the responses to his latest lonely-hearts ads while he drank it. Tonight, however, it was obvious he should be out there for as much time as possible. In case there was trouble.

Once on the road, Powder's first stop was on 41st Street east of

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College. Solento's car was there. If she had arrived after the time designated by Lureen Twalken no doubt the old woman would tell him.

There was a light on in the house Powder identified as Connie Cornly's, and nobody was on the porch. Presumably they'd found a way in. There was no ambulance, no siren in the distance. False alarm?

As he climbed the steps to Cornly's front porch, Powder glanced at the windows in the other half of the double. Lights shone through flowery curtains but there was no sign that anyone inside knew two police cars were on their doorstep. It didn't prove an unneighborly attitude, but it certainly didn't contradict it.

Powder knocked twice on Cornly's door and then tried the knob. It was unlocked and he entered the empty living room. "Hello?"

He heard noises from upstairs, but movement straight ahead caught his eye. He passed though a dining area into a kitchen and found Lureen Twalken. She was near the back door and had her back to him.

"Mrs. Twalken?"

The sound clearly startled her. As she turned she said, "You nearly killed me. Is that what you want?" She took a breath and gave her head a shake. "I didn't hear you come in. And about time, young man."

"Have you found your friend?"

"No. Your officer is checking upstairs."

"Is it unusual for Ms. Cornly to go away without telling you?"

"Very," Mrs. Twalken said.

"If she's not upstairs, what will you do?"

"There's a son. I don't know his number, but he's probably in the book."

Powder considered for a moment.

"She's a nice girl," Mrs. Twalken said.

"What?"

"Your young officer. She's a nice girl. Very helpful."

"How did she get you in?"

"The bathroom window was open a crack. She got in there, then came to open the front door."

Powder nodded and left for the second floor.

He met Solento at the top of the stairs. "Well?"

"There's no one here, Lieutenant. I've checked carefully, closets and everything."

"I gather you didn't have to break the door down."

"The top sash in the bathroom was open."

"Any signs of the owner having been taken away by force?"

"Check for yourself." Her tone included annoyance.

"I'm asking you, Officer Solento. In your professional opinion, are

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there signs of the owner having been forced to leave the house?"

"No. Sir."

"Or having left in a rush?"

Solento thought for a moment. "I wouldn't say so, no."

"No drawers half open? No washing left wet in the machine? No cat yowling to be fed?"

"None of the above."

"And what do you conclude from your investigations?"

"My best guess . . . is that the owner went somewhere and that her friend got lonely and called us out."

"You think Mrs. Twalken is a time-waster?"

"I don't feel that looking in closets is why I was pulled off my shift and sent up here."

"Hmm." Powder's mouth twitched, as if he'd been thinking of cats and whiskers. He turned and went back down the stairs.

Mrs. Twalken was waiting at the bottom. "I can see from your faces that Connie's not up there."

"Correct," Powder said.

"So you think I'm just a stupid old woman." Mrs. Twalken banged her cane on the wooden floor. "Well, better safe than sorry. And if Connie had been in here, you'd be congratulating me."

"It's not a problem, ma'am," Lisa Solento said. "Of course it's better to be sure."

To Solento Powder said, "Secure the place, and leave a note for the owner to explain that we've been inside."

"That's hardly necessary," Mrs. Twalken said. "I'll tell Connie as soon as she gets back."

"I'd prefer she heard it from us. If we happen to have left something out of place, I wouldn't want her to think she's had burglars. Shall we go?"

"Where?"

"I'll walk you home."

"That, too, is not necessary. I am perfectly capable of making my own way, young man."

"I don't doubt it for a moment," Powder said. "But better safe than sorry, eh?"

After seeing Lureen Twalken into her house, Powder went back to wait for Solento. It wasn't long before he saw her emerge from shrubbery beside Connie Cornly's house.

"Everything secure?"

"Not entirely. I came out the same way I got in."

"Through the bathroom window?"

She nodded. "I closed it up as well as I could."

"Must have taken some agility." Powder had looked at the bathroom and its window.

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"I was a junior gymnast in Kansas City."

"Kansas City's loss was Indy's gain. You left a note?"

"I did. Station phone number, my name, and so on. Can we get out of here, Lieutenant?"

"Too good to come all the way from the Southside to spend the shift humoring lonely old ladies?"

"I didn't mean that, but . . . well, you know."

"What do I know?"

"There are bad guys out there, Lieutenant."

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where are the bad guys who are out there? You've got a map. Pull it out. Show me. We'll go there now and get us some bad guys."

Solento sighed.

"What's the matter, Officer Hotshot Who Only Deals With Bad Guys?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Tell me, how impatient would you be if you'd discovered an old lady gasping for breath on the bathroom floor when you leapt through the window like Spiderwoman? How pissed off would you be if the paramedics were closing the ambulance door and one of them patted you on the back and said, 'We got here just in time, and it's all thanks to you'?"

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

"You are sorry. A sorry excuse for a police officer if you don't have time to listen to someone who's worried about an elderly neighbor."

Solento fixed her eyes on the ground.

"Now you're thinking, 'At least I'm only here for five days.' Well, I'll tell you something, maybe I'll use some of my influence downtown to get you assigned up here permanently. Make you a better cop. Since it seems they can spare you down south."

"I am sorry, sir."

Powder was silent for a moment. "Tell me something, Lisa. Do you garden?"

"Sir?"

"That's not too difficult a question, is it, even for someone from the Southside. Do you garden? Grow plants."

"I do, a little."

"Inside, or out? Do you have houseplants? Grow vegetables? Shrubs? What?"

"I have a few houseplants," Solento said. "Rob, my husband, likes to grow flowers, as it happens."

"Did you notice Ms. Cornly's houseplants?"

Solento frowned.

"Yucca in the living room on the piano. Philodendron on a wall

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rack in the dining room. African violets in the kitchen."

"I . . . I guess I noticed vaguely there were some plants around."

Powder was about to speak when their radios came alive. What they heard was Dispatch reporting that a woman looking into an alley from her back window had seen a man with a gun and called 911.

Powder said, "I'll get back to you later for clarification of what 'noticing vaguely' means."

A moment later, Jimmy Halton's voice came on the radio saying that he was near the alley and would respond.

Powder said to Solento, "Shall we back Halton up, do you think? Or is the woman who called this in just another of the lonely brigade? Use your special powers, Spidergal. What do you think? Shall we go, or not?" He stood looking at her.

Solento finally realized that he didn't intend to move until she'd answered his question. "We go, sir."

As Powder drove toward the Westside alley, he heard Halton talk about his arrival on the scene. "I'm coming up Twenty-second Street now. I see the alley. Streetlight is out." There was a pause. "I don't see anything strange. I'm going to drive into the alley from the south." Then there was silence.

Powder, already driving quickly, drove faster.

Then Halton said, "I'm about a quarter of the way along and I don't—Wait. There is a guy, by a bunch of garages. Looks like the back of an apartment block. He sees me. He's putting his hand in his jacket. Uh-oh, there's a gun in his belt. I wouldn't mind some backup here. Getting out now."

Radio silence from that point meant that Halton was using both hands for other things.

Powder was the first shift officer on the scene. But just as he was about to turn into the alley from 23rd Street, Halton came back on the radio again. "It's all clear here. No backup needed. You can go back to your donuts."

Powder's headlights caught Halton standing next to his car, radio in hand. Next to him was a stocky man in a jacket that was too small for him. Halton's weapon was holstered.

Powder drove till his car was nose to nose with Halton's, then got out. "Hey, Jimmy."

"It's clear here, Lieutenant. Mr. Valdez is the manager's brother. He's licensed to carry his gun. I've seen the paperwork."

"How do you do, Mr. Valdez?"

"Fine, Lieutenant, and yourself?"

"Peachy."

Halton said, "Mr. Valdez works for a security company and his brother asked him to keep an eye on the cars parked at the back of

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the apartment building."

"That's right," Valdez said. "They had thefts from cars back here and somebody tried to get in through the service door. We gonna give it a few days to see if me keeping an eye out stops the malfeasances. Meantime put in some closed-circuit."

"That ought to do it," Powder said.

Halton said, "The woman who phoned in is one of the apartment residents. Looks like she didn't hear about the new security arrangements."

Solento's car pulled up behind Powder's. She was getting out as Valdez said, "We didn't tell the residents. Figured maybe some of their kids are involved, 'cause the building was kind of targeted. Didn't want to give them no warning."

"Were the thefts and break-ins reported to the police?" Powder asked.

"Dunno about that."

"There's nothing on my sheet for me to tell my shift officers about. You got to call these things in. If we know what's been happening, our patrol cars can keep an eye out. How can we be better cops if you're not better citizens?"

"I tell my brother," Mr. Valdez said. "Meantime they got me here all night."

"If you see somebody, don't be a hero. Don't try to take him into custody yourself." He looked at Solento. "Or her. Give us a call."

The three police officers cleared out of the alley, but at Powder's instruction they pulled up together in front of the apartment building. "What did you want to talk to us about?" Jimmy Halton asked as he approached Powder and Solento.

"Someone should tell the woman in the apartment building what's been going on," Powder said.

"I'll do that," Solento said.

"Stress how if citizens report every crime it makes it more likely we'll get assigned extra people to patrol the neighborhood, and how that helps everybody."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her to tell her friends. Her neighbors."

"Most places," Halton said to Solento, "they try to get the crime rate down. The lieutenant tries to get it up."

"We ought to have more people here," Powder said with passion. "We *need* more people to do our jobs."

"I'm with you and your T-shirt, sir."

"I'm glad we got this chance for a little talk, Jimmy," Powder said. "Something I been meaning to ask you."

"What's that, sir?"

"You into gardening? Houseplants, that kinda thing?"

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"Me? Uh, no, not really."

"But you understand how plants grow. You understand that, right?"

"Stick 'em in dirt. Water 'em. Sunlight. That's about it as far as I know. Sorry, sir."

"That's plenty," Powder said.

"It is?"

"Now, a hypothetical question for you, Jimmy," Powder said. "Make you a better cop. You want to be a better cop, don't you?"

"Okay. Sure."

"I want you to think about some houseplants. Like a yucca. And—"

And just then their radios burst into life. A silent alarm system had been triggered at a carpet store on Meridian.

"Catch you later, Jimmy." On his radio Powder instructed all the officers on the shift to respond to the call. "Except for you," he said to Solento once he was off-radio again.

"Sir?"

"You got a message to get across to a nervous woman in this building. Once you've done that, you can follow on. If you've still got your map."

Daniela Ortega was first to arrive in the immediate vicinity of Capital Carpets. She parked out of sight and made her way carefully to the front of the store. "Nothing visible from here," she reported by radio to her fellow officers as they drew near.

Weitz was second and headed for the back of the Capital Carpets building. Olson was not far behind him. "Door is wide open back here," Weitz said after a minute. "And . . . And there's a light on in there."

"I'm pulling up now," Olson said.

"What's it look like from the front, Daniela?" Weitz said. "Are there ways out on the sides or do we have it covered, front and back?"

"No exits on the north side," Ortega said. "Only a couple of windows with wire mesh over them. I'm going to ease myself past the front window to check the south side. I'm going now. I'm at the front. I'm . . . Jesus Christ!"

"What?" Weitz said. "What do you see?"

"There's a guy in there trying to cut a piece off a roll of carpet is what's in there."

"Any weapons?"

"He's got a big pair of scissors."

Anthony Bernard Monikson's first words when Weitz and Olson suddenly appeared behind him were, "Uh-oh." He dropped his scissors as instructed. Then he said, "Brenda's going to kill me."

By the time he was cuffed and Mirandized, Rolleson, Powder,

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and Halton were all on the scene. By the time Solento pulled up, Monikson had voluntarily explained that he'd panicked on discovering that the piece of carpet he'd bought his wife Brenda for her birthday wasn't big enough to cover the dining-room floor. All he could think of to do before tomorrow was cut her a bigger piece off the same roll.

"Brenda *is going to* kill you, all right," Powder told him. He sent Weitz off to book the tearful perpetrator, then gathered for a few words with the rest of the officers.

"He was screwed anyway," Rolleson said.

"Why's that, Sarge?" Olson asked.

"Because he didn't think about wrapping paper. My damn wife, you could get her a gold bar and if it wasn't wrapped right she'd say, 'Didn't you care enough to make it pretty for me?'"

"Tough to make a gold bar look pretty," Ortega said. "It's just a brick."

"You want to give me a gold bar, Daniela," Olson said, "you don't even have to put a bow."

"Hey," Powder said, "since I got you together, I want to ask, any of you guys into houseplants?"

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?" Olson said.

"Houseplants," Halton said. "It ain't rocket science."

"You mean, leaves and flowers and dirt and that?" Olson said.

"I like houseplants, Lieutenant," Daniela Ortega said. "What about them? You want some recommendations?"

"Lieutenant's got a sweetie," Olson said. "What is it, her birthday?"

"My damn wife would get a plant, all she had to do was touch it and it'd die," Rolleson said.

"Or maybe the lieutenant's going to show up at Brenda's tomorrow. Catch her on the rebound."

Powder raised a hand. It achieved some silence. "Listen up," he said. "Become better cops." He turned to Ortega. "I don't want recommendations. I want to talk something through."

"Okay," Ortega said.

"Now suppose you're an old lady and you got some houseplants."

"Okay."

"And suppose there's a neighbor who calls us to say you're not answering your door, and you always tell her when you're going away, but you didn't."

"So we want to check the house in case the neighbor's had an accident."

"And you're not lying on the floor, and there's no sign of anything wrong. The doors are locked, the dishes are washed, and so on."

"So I went away and forgot to tell the neighbor. I'm old. I can forget stuff."

"Good. Good," Powder said.

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"So what about the houseplants?"

"Now suppose the dirt in the pots of all the houseplants is moist to the touch. Suppose there's even water standing in the saucers the pots are in."

"I watered the plants before I left. I care for them. I do that."

"You remembered to do that, but you didn't remember to tell your neighbor you were going away?"

"It could happen."

"Okay," Powder said. "Tell me something else. When you go away somewhere, do you tell a neighbor?"

"I tell my sister. She lives about a mile away."

"Okay. Why do you tell your sister?"

"So she can look in now and then, see things are okay."

"She have a key?"

"Sure. I'm not old, but I live alone, something could happen."

"She doesn't hear from you, she might come in?"

"She'd call first. But if I didn't answer, sure, she'd come over, and come in."

"Water your houseplants?"

"She does that for me sometimes, yeah."

"Great. Thanks, Daniela. Appreciate it."

"What's this all about, Lieutenant?"

Powder turned to Solento. "What do you think, Solento? Connie Cornly's plants were well watered. Lureen Twalken didn't have a key."

"You're thinking . . . " Solento frowned. "You're thinking she wasn't really Cornly's friend?"

"What I'm thinking is that she just got us to break into the house for her."

Once the shift officers scattered to cover Lennie Weitz's sectors as well as their own two or three, Powder and Solento headed back for 41st Street. At Powder's instruction they parked near the corner at College and walked in toward Connie Cornly's house.

"I used to have a garden," Powder said. "It was a bit of land out on the northeast. Peach trees, everything. I loved it out there."

"You don't have it anymore?"

"Gave it to my son. He cut all the trees down. It's a long story."

"I was thinking on the way over here, Lieutenant."

"What?"

"You walked Mrs. Twalken home. I secured the house myself. If we broke in, we locked up after."

"Mmm. Maybe."

Solento frowned. At least Powder figured she was frowning. He couldn't see in the dim light.

What he did see as they got to the house was that there was a

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light on in an upstairs room.

"The owner's back home?" Solento said.

"Possibly." Powder faced the house.

"You want me to go in the bathroom window again?"

"Do you leap tall buildings in a single bound, too?"

"Only on weekends."

"Let's try the doors first."

They found the kitchen door unlocked.

"It was locked when I left it," Solento said. "I'm sure of that."

"The old witch picked up a spare key," Powder said. "I bet it was by the back door. I bet I saw her do it."

"But . . . why, Lieutenant? What's it all about?"

Powder's main concern on entering the house was that they did not so startle Lureen Twalken that she had a heart attack or something.

If he'd had more people out on patrol, he might have waited, or posted Solento to wait, until Twalken left Connie Cornly's house, or at least came downstairs. But he simply didn't have the manpower to do that this time. Or the womanpower. He was going to have to go to Lureen Twalken where she was, upstairs. If she collapsed and died, the Wise Men and Women Downtown would be responsible. Dummies that they were. If only they'd make sure the shift had enough people on patrol . . .

"Let's go up," Powder said. "Ready? Go on."

"Ready," Solento said. She began a stealthy ascent of the stairs.

Behind her Powder stomped his foot and kicked the stairs. "Mrs. Twalken," he shouted.

Lisa Solento nearly fell over.

"So what are you going to do now?" Lureen Twalken said. "Take me downtown? Throw the book at me?" She stuck her wrists out.

"We cuff people behind their backs," Powder said. "If you're cuffed in front, you could use the cuffs as a weapon." He took handcuffs from his belt.

Lureen Twalken scowled. "I can't get my hands behind my back. My shoulders don't give me that kind of mobility."

"Officer Solento will be able to twist your arms. She's very strong. Very agile."

"You are joking," Lureen Twalken said. Then, "Aren't you?"

"I'm not in a very jokey mood, Mrs. Twalken. You don't seem to have given the slightest consideration to the fact that by occupying my time and that of Officer Solento, you might have put other citizens of Indianapolis at risk."

"Desperate situations call for desperate remedies."

"Meaning?"

"I've been law-abiding all my life, but I'm not going to live much

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longer. I ran out of time."

"For?"

"For my sister to find some compassion."

"Ms. Cornly is—"

"I *told* her I'd find a way to get in." The old woman snorted. "And I did, by God."

"And all this . . . ?" Powder gestured to photographs spread on a bed in the small room he and Solento had found Lureen Twalken in.

"Connie burned all Jack's letters. Every one. Can you believe that? Marched into my house one day when I was out and turned it upside down till she came to the hatbox. All she left me of Jack was the ashes of his words."

Powder watched as the old woman shook her head in silent disbelief. Then she held one of the photographs up. "But even she had to keep pictures of him. Their kids would have asked questions. And by God, I'm keeping this one now." She slipped the picture under her blouse. "Do with me what you will, but you're not getting this back from me." She banged her cane on the floor.

"All that, just to get a picture of an old boyfriend?" Juanita Spondelmyer said.

"Not just any old boyfriend. A boyfriend who happened to be married to her sister at the time."

"Nasty."

"That's what the sister thought."

"Even so, it was a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"Before you were born, Juanita," Powder said. "You didn't have a clue what kind of world you were coming into, did you?"

"So what *did* you do with her?"

"I didn't take her keepsake, if that's what you mean, but she's a lawbreaker. So I took her downtown. They only had space in the female drunk tank, but I'm sure it will be a learning experience for her."

"You didn't!"

"See right through me, don't you?"

"So?"

"I took her home after she put the rest of the pictures back where she found them. Left Solento to lock up and write a new note for the sister, including telling her to call me when she gets back."

"When will that be?"

"Don't know. The sisters don't talk. Twalken saw a taxi pull up and saw her sister leave with a small case. She figured it was her chance, if she acted quickly."

"So what did you do with her after you took her home?"

"Told her that next time she should give us a break and call nine-one-one. Hey, did I show you my T-shirt yet?" ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE BEAST FROM THE WESTERN STEPPES

by Martin Limón

1.

On a straw-thatched village in the Qilian Mountains, charcoal smoke from cooking fires wound toward the blue of the darkening sky. Chou Xiao-lan, an adolescent girl known as Small Orchid, brought in the last of the day's laundry for her mother. The load she carried was too big for her still-not-fully-grown arms, and one garment, her father's white tunic, fell on the neatly swept dirt of the courtyard.

Small Orchid stepped up on the narrow wooden porch of her parents' hut and dumped the stiff laundry on the wood-slat floor.

"*Aiyou,* Mother, again I have made a mistake."

The wrinkled woman, sitting cross-legged on the floor, didn't look up from darning a hemp cloak.

"You make few mistakes, good daughter."

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"But it's Father's tunic and it's dirty again and if it's not pure white he will be shamed in front of the other men."

Small Orchid reached for the long wooden stick used by her mother to beat the clothes into cleanliness on the flat rocks at the edge of the nearby stream.

"The hour is late, Daughter. Leave it for tomorrow."

"Don't worry. It will only take a few moments."

Before her mother could protest, Small Orchid was out the door, marching through the darkness of the dirt pathway, listening for the familiar bubbling of the cold mountain waters.

Though Martin Limón's new story may seem to contain elements of the fantastic, it is based on research about an ancient tribe that inhabited the Tarim Basin, in what in modern China is Sinjiang Province. The "Beauty of Loulan" referred to in the story is presumed by some local Uighur people today to be one of their ancestors. The events of this tale take place in the Han Dynasty, during the reign of Emperor Wu Ti, about 102 B.C.

When she reached the stream, she knelt down, dunked her father's tunic in the water, and sloshed it around a few times until it was completely soaked. Then she set the moist cloth on a flattened rock, picked up the stick, and began hammering.

First, he felt movement, like a wave of power that upset the flowing rhythms of the approaching night. Then he heard footsteps. Instantly he knew it wasn't a beast of prey. No great cat or mountain bear would be so clumsy. It must be game, coming toward the water. Silently he rose from the rock and pulled himself toward the edge of the cliff.

He halted for a moment, startled by the fat, splashing sound of wood on wet cotton. He listened carefully. No sounds of danger. Just another of the weird ways of these sedentary people who huddled in mud dwellings amidst these cold mountains. He crept closer to the edge.

A form hunched in dim light. Female? She had some sort of weapon, like the clubs that he used to crack open nuts or subdue game. But she was small. Even with the weapon she would pose no threat.

He crept behind rustling shrubs, closer to the small female on the banks of the stream. He was concentrating so hard on her, and he was so exhausted from the hardships of his long journey, that he slipped on a pebble. Without thought, he darted farther into the darkness, away from the sound he had just made.

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Small Orchid straightened up. What was that? A pebble, maybe, kicked by a hare or a small creature of the night. Or maybe a night spirit? They sometimes floated through these mountain passes, but she told herself not to worry. Just three days ago a sorceress from the town by the great river had visited their small village of Hualien and sang and danced and beat her drum for three solid hours. No spirit would be brave enough to return so soon after hearing the awesome power of the witch's spell.

Small Orchid settled back on her haunches and continued pounding dirt from her father's tunic.

Farmer Chou finished sharpening his tools, kicked off his flat straw sandals, and stepped into the warm hut.

"Where is dinner, wife?"

"Hush. You will have to wait. Small Orchid went down to the stream to wash your tunic but she has not returned."

"When did she go?"

"Just as darkness fell."

Farmer Chou was a husky man and now his broad face turned red.

"I *told* you not to let her go out at night. Have you forgotten about the evening spirits?"

"But the shaman was here not three days ago and . . ."

"*Aagh.* Foolish woman! You believe too much in superstition. Do you think a simple-minded old witch could frighten away the evil spirits of the night? Fetch me my lamp. I will go for Small Orchid myself."

The woman hurried to get the paper lamp and lit the wick of the candle nestled within.

"Hurry, husband. I am worried about her."

"*Aigu!* It is probably nothing. You know what a dreamer she is. I'll find her squatting by the stream staring at the rising moon."

Small Orchid's mother wrung her hands as her husband strode off into the darkness. When he returned, he carried a torn piece of clothing and his face was pale. He handed the lamp to his wife. She recognized the white tunic he clutched in his hand and when she saw the drops of blood, she screamed.

2.

Rose-tipped fingers plucked the strings on the neck of the gourd-bottomed lute like a robin frolicking in a plum tree.

Her hair was an ebony pagoda piled atop her head and her face was as pale as freshly fallen snow. Silk vestments the color of jade caressed her body. I nodded, she smiled, and I returned to brush-stroking Chinese characters onto the bamboo slat in front of me.

Her quavering voice filled the large official dining hall of the

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province of Gansu. It was packed with minor officials like myself, sitting atop three-legged stools in front of long black tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl. We laughed and jabbed with our chopsticks at a sumptuous array before us of mint leaves soaked in the oil of soya and the speckled shells of boiled quail eggs and the sliced haunches of mountain hares, marinating in vinegar and pepper sauce. Raising both hands to the height of our noses, we toasted one another with small porcelain cups filled with millet wine.

The prefect of Gansu and the eldest of his gray-bearded advisors presided at the head table along with the guest of honor, my master, Yuan Guang-fu, Royal Inspector of the Rank of the Fifth Dragon. Their robes were made of flowing red silk richly embroidered in gold, except for my master, who wore only the plain blue cotton working robes and black horsehair hat of a faithful minion of the Emperor Wu Ti.

We had been here five days now, on an inspection tour of the granaries of the provincial capital of Lanzhou. My master was doing his usual meticulous job, checking the inventories against the receipts paid to farmers and comparing those figures to the ledgers of the prices charged to the poor people of the city. A small profit to keep the Royal Granary in operation was fine. But if thievery was found, the culprit would face not only the wrath of the Inspector of the Fifth Dragon but also the wrath of the great man who was his mentor: Wu Ti, scion of the dynasty Han, Lord of the Central Kingdom, the Emperor of China on his Dragon Throne.

Serving girls scurried through the multitude, clearing plates, bringing in fresh platters of marinated venison or heaping bowls of the boiled cabbage soup of these mountainous western climes. The floor of the hall was constructed of varnished wood slats polished to a gleaming cleanliness. I shifted my weight on my pillowed stool and reached with my silver chopsticks toward the quail eggs on the far side of the table.

A door slammed angrily.

From the west, a gust of cold mountain air whipped its icy tentacles across my neck.

A messenger stood in the doorway, wrapped in the icicle-draped fur of a wolf. He unwound his stiff leggings, stepped up on the raised floor, padded forward in his damp stockings, and prostrated himself in front of the prefect of the province of Gansu.

Rapid mumblings ensued. My master leaned forward to catch the conversation and shot questions at the courier. Then, Inspector Yuan looked up, caught my eye, and motioned for me to come forward.

I trotted around the ravenous multitude and when I reached the head table, I knelt behind my master.

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The square, even features of Inspector Yuan Guang-fu's clean-shaven face were set in stone. He spoke crisply, as was his wont.

"Report, Good Courier, for my scribe here, what you have just told us."

I pulled out my inkstone and brush and my bamboo writing slats, limbering my fingers as I did so.

A dripping black moustache covered the courier's blue lips. He seemed exhausted. However, he swallowed through a parched throat and began.

"In the village of Hualien, high in the QiLian Mountains, a young girl was taken. Not by a man or a tiger or a bear—for such trifles your honored personages wouldn't be bothered—but by a beast the likes of which the villagers of these mountains have never before seen."

"What manner of beast?" Inspector Yuan asked.

"They have no words for it. But the evidence suggests it might be a very large monkey."

The prefect of Gansu was a puff-cheeked, oily man. He leaned forward.

"Have these reports been verified?"

"Yes, Your Honor. By strange footprints, and by the great strength of the creature, which apparently carried the girl off but still managed to vanish, although the villagers started a search soon after her disappearance."

The prefect leaned to his side and held a whispered conference with his narrow-eyed advisor. He turned back.

"Very well. I will send a magistrate in good time to investigate the allegations. You are dismissed."

The courier bowed his head to the floor and backed respectfully out of the hall.

Inspector Yuan turned to me.

"Send a dispatch to Emperor Wu immediately, informing him of this sighting."

The prefect's advisor coughed and spoke in a voice graveled with rocks.

"That wouldn't be advisable, Good Inspector. These reports are probably nothing more than the overheated imaginations of peasants who've consumed too much millet beer at their autumn festival."

"Perhaps. But the good Wu Ti takes a particular interest in the fauna of his empire."

"Yes," the elder said. "But if false, this report could prove embarrassing to our humble province."

"Worry not," Inspector Yuan said. "My inspection of your granaries has been completed. I will check out this report myself." He turned to me. "Go to the stables, Clerk Li Meng, and order our

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mounts prepared. We ride at once."

"In this snow, sir?"

The Inspector of the Fifth Dragon stared at me. Even in this warm room, my blood turned to ice. Instead of saying anything further, I bowed and hurried off to complete my duties.

3.

A full moon hung in the black night like the glimmering face of Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. Astride his white steed, Inspector Yuan pointed toward a clump of straw-thatched roofs that sat in a narrow valley along the banks of a bubbling stream.

"The farming village of Hualien," he said. "The home of the victim of the strange beast."

A sea of sparkling stars filled the night. We had ridden all day and into the night to reach this desolate spot far from civilization. The mountain air was so cold that it bit sharply into my nostrils.

As we rode into the village, a group of wizened elders were up and waiting for us, wearing their best hemp-cloth tunics and baggy pantaloons. I wondered how they had known we were approaching at this late-night Hour of the Rat, but these mountain people know things that are beyond the ken of city dwellers. A stoop-backed old man gripped his crooked cane, bowed deeply to my master, and spoke in a quavering voice.

"Welcome, oh Great Lord, to our humble village of Hualien."

Inspector Yuan dispensed with all formalities and ordered the elders to take us to the home of the missing girl.

The bereaved family sat around a guttering oil lamp in their drafty hovel. The mother seemed almost too old to have a young daughter. Her eyes were rimmed with red. A broad-shouldered man looked up at us. Splotches of short whiskers stubbled his chin.

My master spoke first.

"You were very brave, Farmer Chou, to take your grievance straight to the provincial prefect."

The man bowed his head. "Small Orchid was our only child. I thought the prefect should know about this marauding beast so he could bring the creature to justice."

The village elder spoke up.

"The demons of the night took the girl, sir. We have looked everywhere, but there is no clue as to where she's been taken."

"Nonsense," Inspector Yuan said. "There's always a trace. Always."

The elder held out a wrinkled tunic and a short wooden stick. "She was doing laundry at the stream. This is all that was left."

"And traces of blood," another villager said. "The beast must have snatched her quickly."

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Both Farmer Chou and his wife turned away.

As we talked, the entire population of the village of Hualien silently gathered at the entranceway. More than twenty people. Inspector Yuan held up the bloody tunic.

"Take me to the spot where this was found."

A few of the younger men were ordered by the elder to accompany us. Farmer Chou roused himself from his lethargy, stood up, and emerged from his hut.

"I will go, too, Good Inspector."

My master nodded, and soon our small troupe marched off into the cold night. Paper lanterns appeared in the hands of some of the men. The Moon Goddess smiled beneficently on our puny efforts.

At the edge of the village a small creek meandered downhill. We walked along it for almost half a *li* until it widened into a slowly swirling pool.

"This is where the women do the laundry," the elder said. "And it was here that the bloody tunic was found and signs of a struggle were seen."

Inspector Yuan knelt and studied the ground, but there was nothing to be seen but much sand and dirt and scuffed gravel. Along the edge of the stream were a few flat rocks. They were so worn, they looked as if they'd sat here since the universe emerged from chaos.

Inspector Yuan surveyed the narrow valley, illuminated by moon glow. Across the creek, granite cliffs rose into the sky. Behind them the steep terraces of the Qilian Mountains climbed toward Heaven.

"The courier said you found footprints," Inspector Yuan said.

"Yes. Here." One of the young men kneeled. "But the stream has washed them away."

"What were they like?"

"Almost like a man's, except narrower, and the toes were so long they looked like fingers."

"More like a handprint," one of the villagers said.

"Don't be foolish," another villager replied. "What we saw was merely the footprint of a deformed man."

"How could a man escape from this valley so quickly? And without leaving a trace?"

Inspector Yuan's voice roared out.

"Silence!" He turned to Farmer Chou. "You sent men to follow the creek, both upstream and down?"

"Yes. For many *li*."

"And you've checked with neighboring villages?"

"Yes. No one has seen Small Orchid."

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"What about those cliffs?" Inspector Yuan pointed toward the granite walls that loomed beneath the red moon.

"The climb is too dangerous, sir," the elder said. "And surely no beast would be able to scale such a precipice."

My master stared at the promontory thoughtfully. It was a lone column in front of the cliffs, standing aloof and desolate.

"I disagree. A Siberian tiger might be able to make it, if he were sufficiently motivated. Maybe even a snow leopard. But you're right. They certainly wouldn't be able to scale such heights while clutching a burden in their jaws."

Farmer Chou flinched. My master turned, realizing his mistake. He cleared his throat.

"Nevertheless, it is the only place that hasn't been searched. Therefore, we must search it."

"But the climb is dangerous."

"Yes. But it must be done."

"As you wish," the elder said. "Tomorrow, at first light, I will ask two of our strongest lads to make the climb."

"Not tomorrow. Now. And we will not ask any of you good farm folk to take this risk. Myself and my faithful scribe, Clerk Li Meng, are perfectly capable of scaling such a height."

A murmur of admiration floated through the crowd. All eyes turned to me. My mouth fell open, and I'm not sure but I think my knees began to wobble.

4.

When I clambered onto the top of the promontory, I lay on the ground for a few moments, every muscle in my body quivering and covered with perspiration. Desperately, I tried to catch my breath, all the while praising the earth beneath me for its flatness.

When I had recovered sufficiently, I glanced around and then quickly shut my eyes, unable to grasp immediately the full horror of the objects that lay scattered around the house-sized expanse at the top of the flat rock ledge of the promontory.

The air reeked of rotted flesh. Flies buzzed. Even with the night as cold as it was, they had materialized from somewhere. Inspector Yuan had completed the climb first and he was already poking through the filth, his face a mask of absorbed interest.

Farmer Chou, still scaling the side of the promontory, hollered up at us. "What is it? What do you see?"

We didn't answer. I sat up, pulled out my writing brush, and forced myself to make a survey of what I observed.

The clothing of a small woman was the first thing. Torn, shredded, and bloody. It was the least objectionable object on this cursed stone shelf. Near the clothing were bones: some of them still hooked together at the joints, others still with bits of flesh clinging

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to them. The largest of the bones had been cracked open. Without daring to touch it, I peered in. The center was hollow. Something had sucked out the marrow.

In the center of all this jumble sat an object that I told myself I would look at later. I was afraid to look at it now.

Farmer Chou pulled himself over the ledge and gaped at the debris surrounding us. Frantically, he pushed through the bones, throwing them aside as if somehow searching for his daughter amidst the rubble. Finally he grabbed it, the object that I had not allowed myself to see.

Farmer Chou caressed it and cradled it and rubbed it against his cheek, and instead of crying out in a shriek of agony he began to laugh and sing gleefully into the night.

"Thank you, O Spirits of the Wind," he said. "Thank you for your generosity."

Fearfully, I glanced at the hideous object. It had long, matted gray hair and ragged tendrils hanging from its neck. The rust-caked sockets that once held eyes stared blankly into eternity. Then I realized what it was.

Inspector Yuan grabbed Farmer Chou's shoulder, swiveled him around, and yanked him close. Farmer Chou let loose his grip and the severed head dropped, rolled off the edge of the precipice, and bounded down the boulders below, each bounce making a sickening splash against stone.

"What's the matter with you?" Inspect Yuan asked. "Have you gone mad?"

"Mad? Me? No," Farmer Chou answered. "I am happy!" He held something up in the moonlight. "See? This is another piece of her skirt. She must have taken it off and left it here as a sign. And the head, it wasn't my daughter's head at all but the head of a goat! A mountain goat. And these bones are the bones of a goat also. Don't you see? Small Orchid is alive!"

Inspector Yuan sat back, staring warily at Farmer Chou. "Let us hope so."

The farmer rummaged through more of the tattered cloth.

"These are her pantaloons, and her outer cloak, and her undergarments. She will freeze. Why did she leave them here?"

Inspector Yuan thought for a moment and then he said, "She had no choice."

He held a long, arrowhead-shaped stone up to the moonlight.

"I found this amongst the debris," Inspector Yuan said. "It is primitive, but still a fine piece of work. The edges have been chipped into a sharp blade. Agate, I believe." He swept his arm across his body to indicate the leavings in front of us. "If you notice, certain of the remains of this unfortunate goat are missing. First, of course, the flesh. Understandable enough, since the hunter

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had to eat. The other portion that is missing is the goat's hide."

Inspector Yuan rubbed the edge of the sharpened stone along his thumb, flinched, and held up the digit for both of us to see. A small trickle of blood crept toward his wrist.

"Behold the sharpness. I believe the creature used this stone to butcher the goat and to relieve it of its skin." He swiveled his head slowly, pondering the items on the ground. "But your daughter's clothing has been left behind."

Then the inspector knelt down and picked up a shred of torn cloth. He held it up to the moonlight, twirling it between thumb and forefinger. He handed it to me.

"Observe, Clerk Li," he said. "A fine weave. Wool. Of multicolored thread, patterned in a detailed tapestry."

I studied the odd shred of cloth. Never before had I seen anything like it. The woolen string made a cross-hatch pattern that was almost dizzying in its complexity. I handed the patch to Farmer Chou. He stared at it, puzzled. When I finished my notes, I asked Inspector Yuan, "What does it all mean, sir?"

Inspector Yuan turned and peered off toward the granite peaks of the Gansu Range.

"Why would he take Small Orchid with him?" Farmer Chou asked.

"That is an interesting question," Inspector Yuan answered. "A question that I don't know the answer to. But one thing is certain, this is no ordinary beast. In fact, it is no beast at all. It is a man."

"A man?" Farmer Chou asked. "But no one has even seen a man such as this in these parts. His feet were so big and the toes so oddly shaped. What manner of man is he?"

Inspector Yuan breathed deeply, trying to find strength in the cold fresh air that swirled around us. "I don't know."

A dark cloud drifted across the face of the Moon Goddess. Inspector Yuan frowned and then his frown deepened. Suddenly he swiveled on us.

"It is clear," he said.

"What is clear?" Farmer Chou asked.

"The reasoning behind all of this." Inspector Yuan waved his open palm to indicate the broken goat remains and tattered clothing that covered the flat ground of the promontory.

"What reasoning?"

"The reason why this man took your daughter. The strange clothing made of woven wool, the hide of a goat, a feast from a goat's flesh. It is clear."

Farmer Chou and I waited.

"The wool clothing," Inspector Yuan explained, "was to disguise Small Orchid, to make her look like one of the women of this man's own tribe. The hide of the goat was for a cloak, to protect her

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against the elements in their sojourn through the Qilian Mountains. The feast from the goat's flesh? I fear, Good Farmer Chou, that it was part of a primitive ceremony. A wedding feast. This man, whoever he is and whatever type of man he is, has stolen your daughter, Small Orchid, and has forced her to become his wife."

5.

Men joined us as we tramped through the vast range of jagged peaks known as the Qilian Mountains. Sightings were reported from both farm folk and hermit monks alike of a tall, hairy man with eyes of the strangest color, a bright green like the plume of a peacock. A young woman had trailed behind him. A barbarian hunter from the warrior tribe of nomads known as the Hsiung-nu volunteered to join us. He called himself Shan-yu and his skills proved invaluable to us. He was adept at finding sign on the trail and locating bones and old campfires where the hairy man and the girl known as Small Orchid had stopped for rest.

At night we made camp. Despite my exhaustion my mind found no rest. Out of my dreams a young girl emerged. She danced for me, the dance of the dead, in furry garments dripping with blood. Then, beneath a black sky splashed with silvery stars, she sat across from someone. Someone gnawing on hot, raw meat. The gory-mouthed demon twisted his long neck and grinned at me and snarled and snapped, laughing, most gleefully, at my foolishness.

Shan-yu slapped me awake. I stared into the weathered flesh of the old nomad's square, bewhiskered face. Then he frowned at me, told me to be quiet, and rolled over and began to snore.

On the morning of our fourth day on the trail, Inspector Yuan spread his wrinkled charts on the ground.

"Here are the sightings," he said. "If we mark them on the map, it becomes apparent that although the hairy man is moving back and forth from one mountain to another, he is working his way steadily toward the west."

"He wants to evade us," Shan-yu said. "It makes sense that he'd go deeper into the mountains."

"Yes. He has his bride now."

"But notice." Shan-yu pointed at the chart. "We have cut him off from the main mountainous route. Probably the path from the west he took to reach your fair country. So now he is in unfamiliar territory, moving back and forth, groping his way toward higher ground."

"You are wise, Good Hunter," Inspector Yuan said. "Are there more like him in the mountains to the west?"

Shan-yu shrugged.

"This is a very mysterious man indeed," Inspector Yuan continued. "If you are right, he will keep moving west toward the intersection of the two branches of the Qilian Range."

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"Above the rapids of the River Tao," Shan-yu added.

Inspector Yuan continued to study the map, becoming increasingly excited. "If he goes there, he will be surrounded by sheer drops on all sides. Even mountain goats do not attempt such a descent. And despite his cleverness, this hairy man does not know these mountains."

"If we arrive there first," Shan-yu replied, "that will be our chance to trap him."

"Notify the volunteers," Inspector Yuan said. "We ride immediately."

That night, after finally making camp, I asked Shan-yu if in the vast reaches of the western steppes he had ever heard of a tall, hairy man such as the one we were chasing.

He stared at me for a long time, as if he would rather thrash me than answer. But he did no such thing. When, finally, he spoke, it was briefly, as was his wont.

"Yes," he said. "But we never speak of them."

6.

Two days later, when we reached the mountains overlooking the River Tao, Inspector Yuan allowed Shan-yu to present our plan of attack to the volunteers. First, Shan-yu pointed out the various approaches to the cliffs above the river. Then the men were divided into groups, the eldest put in charge of each, and they were sent off to various locations and instructed to do their best to keep the hairy man moving toward the cliffs. When the last of the men had left, Shan-yu looked up at Inspector Yuan, still mounted on his steed.

"The two of us, along with our brave Clerk Yi, will take the central route, which is the shortest. It is possible that the hairy man has already reached the cliffs and will be doubling back once he realizes his passage is blocked. We will be straddling his most likely path of retreat."

This did nothing for my confidence. The bowl of brown millet I had eaten in the morning sat in my stomach like a sack of rocks.

When the road up the side of the mountain became too steep, we hobbled our mounts and left them grazing beneath a gnarled oak. As we climbed uphill, small creatures rustled in the foliage. Every time, I jumped.

Shan-yu shook his head in annoyance.

Perspiration built up beneath my tunic. Ahead of us, Inspector Yuan slashed through the underbrush with his short sword. Finally, the thick foliage gave way to tumbled boulders.

We moved upward in silence, creeping like cats through the large rocks. Over a rise, an open plateau spread before us. Shan-yu knelt and motioned for us to be quiet.

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Carefully, I peered around the edge of a boulder.

On the far side of the plateau, near the cliffs, something squatted low to the ground. At first, I thought it was a Chinese, but then I realized that the head was oblong and narrow and long; stringy hair hung loosely to the shoulders. The hair was a lighter color than I had ever before seen. The color of citron, perhaps. Almost red. He wore a thick cloak of goat hair and beneath that were inner garments made of the same patterned wool that the inspector had shown us on the promontory above Hualien. The pants and the tunic were extremely tattered, not much more than rags.

His back was to us, so I couldn't see the face, but he seemed to be staring down at something, as if in deep thought. Or in prayer.

After a time, the man's head slumped farther forwards, as if he were exhausted. When he didn't move, I wondered if he was asleep.

Rocks clattered behind us. Some of the volunteers crept toward us. Shan-yu motioned for them to array themselves in a semicircle along the hairy man's possible routes of escape. Then he whispered to Inspector Yuan.

"We are ready. The men have their instructions."

"Have you spotted Small Orchid?"

"No. She doesn't appear to be with him."

Inspector Yuan sighed. "We are too late." He shook his head, probably from exhaustion, and stared into the eyes of the Hsiung-nu hunter, Shan-yu. "You deserve the honor of the kill, Good Hunter."

Shan-yu bowed his head and said simply, "Thank you."

He crawled forward and pulled his crimped bow off his shoulder. Squatting behind a low boulder, he reached into his quiver, notched a short arrow, and gazed at his target. Suddenly, he pushed the bow up and pulled back the string until his knotted fist was beside his cheekbone. Like thought, the arrow exploded past his nose and burst free with a *thwang*.

Something scuffled in the distance. I searched for the hairy man but already his form had become a blur; up now and sprinting toward the precipice that yawned into the open mountain sky in front of him.

Shan-yu swiveled with him, having already notched another arrow; keeping his arm straight and his nose pointed at his target. Shan-yu unloosed another arrow and then another.

The three missiles arched into the gray morning sky. The hairy man was incredibly tall. More than a head taller than any man I had ever before seen. He loped toward the cliff, the low whistle of the arrows gaining on him, and then he was in the air, floating free, gliding over the edge of the cliff. As he slowly descended, the

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first arrow whizzed past his head and then the other passed higher up. By the time the third arrow arrived, his long, thin body was descending beyond the precipice and he was gone.

We ran forward, all the men shouting. As I stumbled across the mud and rock I heard an unearthly growl from far below—the victory yell of some great beast—and then the faint register of a distant splash. When we reached the edge of the cliff, we peered down and spotted the hairy man bobbing in the blue and white waters of the River Tao, moving away from us toward the churning white rapids below.

"That foul lout!" Shan-yu shouted, waving his curved bow over his head. "I pray to the gods of the river that he smashes his skull on the wet rocks."

Inspector Yuan ripped off his cloak and started to peel off his blue robes. I grabbed him.

"No, sir! You can't go after him. The fall itself might kill you."

Shan-yu grabbed Inspector Yuan's other arm. "And the rocks, the white-water rocks. His misshapen head will surely be cracked against them."

Inspector Yuan took a deep breath, relaxed, and we all stepped forward to see more clearly down the river.

The hairy man sailed through the white water, his oblong skull bobbing like a hollow gourd. He twisted and turned and pushed off against the wicked boulders and somehow sped unharmed through the boiling waves. When he reached slower water, he paddled toward the shore and pulled himself up onto dry land.

He stood silently dripping for a moment. It was now that he looked most human, with all his red hair matted down, showing shoulders and arms and a burly chest. His legs were long and skinny, as were his arms. I can't be sure, but he seemed to be grinning at us. And I thought I saw a flash of bright green eyes.

Suddenly, the hairy man shook himself, water sprayed everywhere, and he turned and trotted into the endless forest. Heading west.

Inspector Yuan continued to stare at the spot where the hairy man had stood. Finally, he spoke.

"It appears that we haven't been hunting this miscreant at all. On the contrary, he's been leading us to a convenient spot so he could make good his escape."

Shan-yu spat over the edge of the precipice.

"Look here!" one of the men shouted.

We turned. At the spot where the hairy man had been squatting was a mound of freshly dug earth.

"He's buried something," the man said. "I will dig it up."

"Hold!" Inspector Yuan stepped in front of the men. "I think I

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know what it is. It would be improper to defile this now. Not without the permission of the parents."

7.

The red sun was slowly dropping behind blue mountains when Farmer Chou and his wife clambered up onto the plateau. Behind them emerged an entourage of clansmen carrying pots of food and earthen jars of millet beer—by way of thanks to the men who had helped in the hunt.

Inspector Yuan and Farmer Chou stood over the mound of freshly dug earth and talked while the rest of us busied ourselves with building a bonfire.

One woman did not work but sat serenely alone on a boulder that had been rolled over for her near the fire by a couple of the young men. She was a big woman with a lush body, wearing a long black dress and a cowled cloak that covered her hair and hid her face in shadow. The "Widow Kuo" is what everyone called her. She was a shaman, said to be famous throughout the Qilian Mountains.

The millet beer was poured and there was much nervous laughter. Some of the men described to the newcomers what they had seen of the hairy man.

Suddenly, the Widow Kuo began to moan. Everyone grew silent. After a few moments of making weird, guttural noises, she stood up and thrust back her cloak, revealing for the first time her face and her long black hair. Her features were even, strong, what one might call handsome, but her complexion had been scarred beyond repair. The pox, it must have been, probably when she was a child. Soon she stood in the middle of a circle of people that had grown around her and then she was dancing in front of the bonfire, her head tilted back, her eyes closed, as if offering herself to the sky.

"Qi," one of the elders said. The inner force.

Inspector Yuan didn't normally approve of such un-Confucian practices, but this was the wish of the family and so he relented and stood at the edge of the circle, his arms crossed, his face contorted in a frown.

"Father!"

Everyone jumped. The scream was eerie, unreal, a girl's voice, but it came from the mouth of the Widow Kuo.

"Father, why have you not come to save me? The hairy man is attacking me, Father. His big hands around my throat, rattling my head. Father, you must save me!"

Farmer Chou sat up, terrified by her voice.

"Small Orchid, we didn't know you were in trouble. The night you were taken we heard nothing."

"Can you not hear his growl, Father? Smell his hot breath? Surely you should take more care for your faithful daughter. I who

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have served you for all these years. And you, Mother, you knew I was at the stream. Would you not send someone to search for me?"

The mother was weeping now, holding her face in her hands, sobbing so violently that she could not speak.

"And the young men of the village, every one, will they not cease their chattering so the good people of Hualien can hear a young girl's screams on the wind? Have I not shown you all respect? And given you warmth and comfort when it was needed? What kind of family is this to turn their backs on a faithful daughter?"

A gust of wind fed life into the bonfire and it sparked and flashed skyward. Farmer Chou sputtered.

"But we didn't turn our backs on you, Small Orchid. We didn't know! You must not spoil our crops or befoul our water. After two bad harvests already, we will surely starve. Seek not your revenge on this poor family, O Spirit of my Daughter. Had we known you were in danger, we would certainly have come to your rescue sooner."

The Widow Kuo grew quiet. Her head slumped and started to rotate in circles that grew gradually wider, until I thought she would surely snap her neck. From the widening gyre of her swirling hair a shattering scream erupted.

"Eeeiiya!"

We all jumped back. Even my master flinched and reached instinctively for the hilt of his sword.

The voice crackled like thunder from the throat of the Widow Kuo.

"He carried me with him, Father, up the sheer cliffs and into the night, and there he had food. Food I could not think about. And he offered some to me as if he were trying to be kind, and then I had some hope. But he took me away deep into the mountains, deep into the ice, and deep into the darkness and the cold of the night. And he kept moving west, Father. West, west, forever west. I followed him, Father, because I knew I could not survive on my own. And he fed me and tried to keep me warm at night with offerings of foul-smelling skins. And he snuffled, Father. Always crinkling his long red nose and snuffling and trying to edge closer to me, but when I screamed in terror he jumped away. As if he were afraid, when it was I who was so afraid of him. And when finally I slept I would awake to see him lying next to me and I would scream and claw and kick to chase him away and he would run as if terrified by the smell of my fear. He wanted me close to him always, Father, but it was hard walking through those mountains, and the food he gave me was often raw and even when he cooked it, I couldn't keep it in my stomach and this made his pale brow crinkle but he wouldn't stop moving west. West, always west. I wanted only to return to our village, to my home and to my mother but he wouldn't let me, Father. He wouldn't let me!"

An anguished scream erupted from the mouth of the Widow Kuo.

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"He's on me, Father! He's on me. Help me, Father. Help me, Mother. Make him leave me alone. I beg you!"

The Widow Kuo was up now, prowling through the crowd, her hair matted wildly at the side of her face, eyes glazed like a rabid beast. Then the Widow Kuo reached down, grabbed a handful of mud, and rubbed it violently into her face. With clumps of grime still clinging to her pockmarked cheeks, she swiped her hand at me and I jumped back. She snatched at all the men but each one, in turn, escaped and rolled away.

And then she tripped and fell and, without slowing, crawled atop the earthen mound. The Widow Kuo lay full length and pressed her cheek on the piled earth. When she spoke again, it was in the soft, whining voice of a little girl.

"Take my bones, Father and Mother, and bury them at our village alongside my ancestors. Let not the beasts make sport with them or burrow into them as their new home. Take my bones and bury them and pay homage to my memory, as my children would have done had I been allowed to live."

Her body jerked like a marionette, as if some god were pulling on giant strings. And then, as if the strings had suddenly been sliced, she let out a long intake of breath and began to breathe softly.

After a few moments, I realized that, like a little girl, the Widow Kuo had fallen asleep.

8.

In the morning we opened the grave. When the body was revealed, Farmer Chou tenderly brushed the dirt out of the open eyes of his daughter and reached into her mouth with two fingers and pulled the clotted mud out of her throat. After the entire corpse was uncovered, we found that she was swaddled in the skin of a mountain goat and in a set of tattered garments too large for her: a skirt and a blouse made of the same tightly woven wool that we'd seen on the hairy man. But the colors were brighter: blue and red and brown for the skirt, red and gold for the blouse. And the hairy man had gone to the trouble to lay the body of Small Orchid in a bed of purple mountain wildflowers.

Her father lifted Small Orchid out of the grave.

After a close inspection by the women, it was announced that her body was intact and she had not been defiled. Her ribs, however, protruded from her body; she must have died of hunger and cold.

A slow and cruel death for anyone.

9.

The next morning, Inspector Yuan stood alone at the edge of the cliff, staring off at the River Tao churning slowly away through the mist. I approached and stood waiting until he spoke.

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"We will not speak of these things, Clerk Li, when we return to the royal court," he said. "Last night, I should not have allowed these people to wallow in their wicked superstitions, but these mountains, and this hairy man, have induced me to shirk my duty. It will not happen again."

I knew better than to speak. Nothing is more precious to Inspector Yuan Guang-fu than the successful completion of his duty. I bowed and started to leave but he called me back.

"You will write a complete report, Clerk Li, of everything we have seen here. Of the death of Small Orchid and of the hairy man who so cruelly stole her from her home."

"Yes, Your Honor."

Shan-yu, the Hsiung-nu hunter, approached us. He bowed before Inspector Yuan and stood waiting, his wrinkled face as unmoving as the granite cliffs that surrounded us.

"In your wanderings," Inspector Yuan said, "in the vast lands to the north and to the west of the Central Kingdom, you nomads known as the Hsiung-nu have encountered many strange people, have you not?"

Shan-yu nodded.

"And that is why," Inspector Yuan continued, "you joined us in this hunt."

Shan-yu said nothing.

Inspector Yuan spoke again. "I have realized from the beginning, Good Hunter Shan-yu, that you know who this hairy man is and what people he comes from. The time has come for you to tell us what you know."

Shan-yu hesitated but finally nodded and began to speak in his garbled western accent.

"From beyond the Jade Gate," he said.

He was speaking of Yu-men Guan, the beginning of the great wall that protects the westernmost city of Tun-huang and thus the western borders of the empire. It is the last outpost of civilization, the last outpost of the Han Dynasty, and the last outpost of the influence of Emperor Wu Ti.

"We fought them for years," Shan-yu continued. "Since before my father's time and before his father's father's time. They were great horsemen and fierce fighters and they lived far to the west of here, on the edge of a vast desert plain south of the Tienshan Mountains, in a fertile valley called Loulan."

Then I remembered. The People of Loulan. Yueh-chih, they had been called in some of the old tales. I had heard bards sing about them as being tall and birdlike and red-haired and odd-looking. But I never imagined they were real.

"A few years ago," Shan-yu continued, "the Hsiung-nu chieftan Usu invaded their land and in a final master stroke of tactics,

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divided their people. Most of them fled westward from Loulan, beyond the Tarim Basin, taking refuge in the unknown lands to the west. A few, however, fought on, inspired by their princess, whom they considered a living goddess and called the 'Beauty of Loulan.' But she was no goddess. For like her followers, she was killed by a Hsiung-nu arrow."

"And this man?" Inspector Yuan asked.

"Her husband. A prince himself. Qumul, they called him. He alone escaped, after his wife and all his people were killed."

"And this Qumul," Inspector Yuan said, "he traveled east, toward China, and found himself alone in a strange land. So he took the girl, Small Orchid, and dressed her like one of his own women. Why? There can be only one reason. He wanted to bring his own tribe back to life."

"Yes," Shan-yu agreed. "Apparently that was his goal." Shan-yu stood taller and stared into Inspector Yuan's eyes. "But when I heard of the abduction of Small Orchid and realized that Qumul must be behind it, I swore that he would not be allowed to carry out his plan. Too many Hsiung-nu sacrificed themselves to conquer the land of the People of Loulan. I will not allow Qumul to rebuild his tribe."

"And so you pursue him?"

Shan-yu nodded. "Until one of us dies."

With that, Shan-yu bowed to Inspector Yuan, turned, and walked off to mount his horse. Before he rode off, the old hunter raised his bow once again and saluted Inspector Yuan Guang-fu.

After Shan-yu disappeared over the far ridge, Inspector Yuan turned and gazed back out over the precipice. He stared off into the west, toward the wooded land where the Prince of Loulan had once lived with his wife, the Beauty of Loulan, at his side.

"A futile hope," Inspector Yuan said.

"What is that?" I asked.

"This Qumul, the Prince of Loulan, hopes to stop the flow of time, to reestablish his people like a phoenix rising from the ashes. He might as well try to stop the flowing of the River Tao. He will die of exposure or he will die at the hands of the hunter Shan-yu."

Inspector Yuan turned to me. "Either way, we Chinese will never again have to stare into the strange green eyes of a tall red-haired man." He sighed and then crossed his arms, hugging his own chest. "Those eyes were cold, were they not, Clerk Li?"

I nodded in agreement.

With that, Inspector Yuan called the men together, gave us our orders, and gratefully we rode east, toward the civilized lands of Chung-kuo, the empire known as the Central Kingdom. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

DeKok and the Hammer Blow

by Baantjer

Translated from the Dutch by H. G. Smittenaar.

Albert Cornelis Baantjer, whose fiction byline is simply "Baantjer," is the most widely read author in the Netherlands. In a country with less than 15 million inhabitants, he has sold almost 5 million books. His most popular fictional protagonist is the hero of this story, Detective Inspector DeKok. Like his fictional character, Baantjer was himself an inspector for the Amsterdam Police for 38 years. He bases his stories and novels on actual cases, and there are, to date, more than fifty titles in his DeKok series.

"I've come to turn myself in."

The woman who sank down in the chair next to DeKok's desk still panted slightly after her exertions on the stairs to the detective room. The old police station at Warmoes Street, in the oldest part of the old quarter of Amsterdam, boasts no elevators.

"I've come to turn myself in," she repeated. "I've murdered my husband."

She took several deep breaths, pressed her spine into the back of the chair, and folded her hands in her lap. There was an expression of resigned expectation on her reddish face.

"I've come to turn myself in," she said once more.

DeKok barely hid a sarcastic grin. Almost thirty years as a cop had taught him to react in a laconic manner to that type of confession.

"How?" he asked.

She did not answer.

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"How did you do it?" urged DeKok.

She raised her chin, almost defiantly.

"With a hammer."

DeKok looked at her more closely. She was a stout woman. DeKok estimated her to be about fifty years old. A motherly type with a generous bosom and streaks of gray in the black hair. He studied her eyes, but could not detect the slightest hint of derangement.

"Where is he now?" tried DeKok carefully.

"Who?"

"Your husband."

"In hell . . . I hope."

There was so much hate and disgust in the tone of voice that DeKok felt a shiver run down his spine.

"I meant, where did it happen?"

She gestured toward the back of the room.

"At home, in the bedroom." She searched in the pockets of her overcoat and produced a bunch of keys. She slapped them on the desk. "Here, go have a look."

DeKok left the woman in the care of the desk sergeant and, accompanied by Vledder, went to the woman's house. It turned out to be an apartment on the second floor of a somber old house in a narrow street between two canals.

They opened the front door and climbed the worn wooden stairs in the dark. On the landing, DeKok searched for the right key while Vledder played his flashlight over the surroundings. He noticed that the wooden front door to the apartment was ripped open in several places and the frame was damaged. Apparently the door had been busted down several times and makeshift repairs had been made.

Inside, the inspectors found appalling destruction. In the living room, the kitchen, everywhere there was broken glass and earthenware. The furniture was mostly ruined. Springs protruded from the upholstery and poked through slashed material. A once-fine sideboard had smashed mirrors and the hinges of the doors were distorted and in one case, ripped out of the wood. The china it had once contained was in pieces all over the floor. One of the drawers had been removed and was in splinters on the floor.

On the bed in the bedroom, lit by the weak light of a bedside lamp, they found a heavily built man. He was dressed in a stained blue suit. He was on his stomach with his face pressed into a pillow. There was a ring of clotted blood on the back of his balding head.

DeKok leaned closer. A disgusting smell of stale, cheap booze came from the corpse. The man was dead, there was no doubt

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about that. The woman must have hit him while he was sleeping off the effects of his intemperance.

DeKok especially noticed a chair next to the bed. A kitchen chair. The only chair in the home that was still intact. The chair was standing there as if somebody had kept watch over the corpse for hours.

On the night table, within easy reach of anyone sitting on the chair, was a hammer. A heavy claw hammer, the type used by carpenters. There was blood on its head. Apparently it was the murder weapon.

After the photographer had left and the coroner had officially pronounced the victim dead, the corpse was taken to the morgue.

DeKok carefully locked the apartment, Vledder sealed the door, and the two inspectors went back to the station house.

It was a simple case. The woman had killed her husband and the motive was easily determined. The destruction of the premises made it obvious. DeKok had run across similar cases often enough . . . a brute of a husband who had driven his wife to murder as a last resort, to end intolerable living conditions.

DeKok took the woman to one of the interrogation rooms. She was calmer now. Less tense than a few hours ago. "How about a cup of coffee?"

The woman nodded gratefully.

DeKok went over to the coffeepot and poured her a cup. Meanwhile he gathered his thoughts, wondering how to start.

Where does marital trouble originate? In the courthouse . . . with the first child . . . the third? How could one pinpoint the first act of lovelessness. The cup was uneven on the saucer, but he managed to put it on the table without spilling. For a while he remained silent and watched her drink the coffee.

"I . . . eh, I went to your home," he began hesitantly.

"I understand."

"It was a mess. Just about everything was broken, or torn apart. The doors hung crooked in the buffet."

She smiled sadly.

"It's been like that for months."

DeKok frowned.

"Months, you say? I thought it happened more recently."

She shook her head.

"In the beginning I used to clean up . . . tried to bring everything back in order. But in the end it became futile." She stared for a moment into the distance. There was a despondent look in her eyes. "After twenty or thirty times," she continued, "I just gave up. I just left things as they were. That's what he wanted, a pigsty."

She moved in her chair and tapped herself on the chest.

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"He knew that, despite everything, I wanted to keep things neat, clean, and tidy. I was always trying to keep up. That buffet, sir, that you mentioned, that sideboard was my pride and joy. It's from shortly after the war. I had a newspaper route then. From the money I earned, I saved for years. I was so proud and happy when I had enough to buy it. It's real oak. It must have absorbed pounds of wax . . . rubbed in with my own hands. And every time he was angry, my buffet had to suffer. He kicked the doors, took an ashtray to make dents in the wood. You see, that's how he was. As soon as he knew I was attached to something, he had to ruin it."

DeKok sighed deeply. Baffled, he rubbed the back of his neck.

"But surely that's no reason to brain somebody."

She grinned grimly.

"No, in that case I would have killed him ten years ago."

DeKok gestured in her direction.

"But you waited this long. Why?"

She leaned closer to DeKok, fire in her eyes, suddenly vehement.

"What choice did I have?" she screamed. "Should I have waited for my boy to do it?"

DeKok was taken aback.

"Your boy . . . your son?"

She sank back in the chair.

"Henk, my oldest. I have four children, two boys and two girls. None of them lives at home anymore. One by one he's driven them away. They don't visit me anymore, either. As long as you're with that guy, they said, you won't see us."

She swallowed a few times.

"The only one who remained loyal was Wimpie, my grandson. He's such a sweet boy . . . nothing bothers him. Even when my son, Henk, told him he could no longer visit his grandmother, he came anyway . . . on the sly."

She started to cry. Her body shook. Big tears dribbled down her cheeks. DeKok offered a clean handkerchief. She dried her eyes.

"Last week he hit the child, just like that, for no reason."

"Your husband?"

"Yes."

"He hit Wimpie?"

Again she started to cry.

"Yes," she said after she calmed down somewhat. "You should have seen it. The poor lamb. His face was all red from the slaps.

"I fled outside with him . . . gave him ice cream, chocolate, money for the movies. Don't tell your father, I said, please don't tell your father."

She rubbed her tear-stained eyes.

"Mister, I know my Henk . . . he's my own son. If he found out that my husband had hit Wimpie, he would have killed him.

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That's why . . . that's why I was so afraid. I hoped and prayed that Wimpie wouldn't say anything."

"And?"

She looked sadly at DeKok.

"The child could hardly keep quiet about it. The first thing they asked, when he came home, was about the bruises."

She fell silent.

"Go on," prodded DeKok after a while.

"Henk has been around twice. Pale as a sheet. Luckily, my husband wasn't home. Henk swore that he would kill him. And he wasn't bragging . . . not my Henk. He would be back, he said."

Again she fell silent, apparently calm and completely under control.

DeKok let her be. He could find nothing to say. Her last words reverberated in his head. The old sleuth stood up and poured another cup of coffee for her and one for himself.

After he had sat down again, he took a few sips. Then he looked up.

"When did it happen?" he asked gently.

"Last night."

"Last night?"

She nodded, sipped her coffee.

"About two in the morning, I think," she said after a long pause.

"But," protested DeKok, "that's almost twenty hours ago. What did you do in the meantime?"

She looked him straight in the eyes.

"I sat with him."

"With your husband?"

She nodded slowly.

"In a chair next to the bed, the hammer in my hand."

DeKok looked a question.

"But why?"

She closed her eyes, as if to shut out a painful memory.

"To wait and see . . . to see if he would come to."

DeKok licked his tongue along dry lips.

"But he didn't come around?"

She shook her head.

DeKok hid his face in his hands. There was no need to ask what she would have done if her husband had come around. He already knew that answer. ●

NOTE TO READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address, so that we can contact them, too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220.

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Frederic Dannay, BSI (continued from p. 93)

Holmes's methods are used to solve the murder of Ellery Queen.

In 1950 the Irregulars proudly proclaimed Dannay a full member. Presenting him with the Investiture of "The Dying Detective" (a play on his frequent use of the 'dying clue'), Morley quoted Dr. Mortimer's comment to Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: "It is not my intention to be fulsome, but I confess that I covet your skull." Dannay was proud to belong. Photos taken at the dinner show him, a twinkle in his eye, playing Col. Moran to Morley's Moriarty, as Holmes (writer Clayton Rawson) escapes from ropes that bind him.

Dannay's editorial decisions reveal the many sides of his Sherlockian character. (It is a fitting tribute that the cover of Irregular John Nieminski's *EQMM* index shows a deerstalkered Holmes reading the first issue of the magazine.) He published Michael Harrison's analysis of Doyle's sources for the names of Holmes, Watson, and Baker Street, and an essay by Tom Stix, Sr. pointing out seven mistakes in "The Red-Headed League." (Dannay the Irregular couldn't resist pointing out an eighth mistake.) Over the years Dannay wrote introductions to nearly 100 Sherlockian parodies, essays, poems, and pastiches in *EQMM*. References to Holmes turn up in the introductions to other stories as well. While urging readers to search used bookstores for the stories of Karl Detzer, he relates his own discovery of the rare first American edition of the *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes,* which, unlike the British edition, contained "The Cardboard Box."

Dannay always remained alert for Sherlockiana, old and new. He reprinted, with appropriate commentary, Rex Stout's scandalous proof that "Watson Was a Woman." He raided the *Baker Street Journal* for physicist Banesh Hoffman's pastiche, which has Holmes using Irregular scholarship to prove Shakespeare had knowledge of the hydrogen bomb, and printed former agent Thomas McDade's comparison of Holmes's methods with those of the FBI. When, in 1974, Irregular historian Jon Lellenberg found an unknown parody by A. A. Milne, Dannay immediately bought it for *EQMM*. In introducing it he not only gives him finder's credit, but goes on to plug Lellenberg's collection of parodies by John Kendrick Bangs.

A complete list of Dannay's Sherlockian writings would fill a small book. In *A Study in Terror* (how grateful Sherlockians were to learn that Queen had not written the pastiche part of that book!), Grant Ames claims Sherlockian expertise and is immediately put to the question. In true Irregular fashion Ellery fires quotation after Canonical quotation at him, all of which he correctly identifies. But the final quote is not from Doyle, but from one of Queen's own books. This byplay hints at an area of the Queen/Holmes connection not yet adequately explored. What, for example, was the name of Ellery's aunt? Clara? Irene? And why, in Francis M. Nevins's *Royal Bloodline,* does the story of the *Misadventures* come exactly in the middle of page 221? These and other questions beg for the sort of irregular investigation Dannay always enjoyed. ●

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GAMES FOR WINTER

by Ann Cleeves

He flew into Stillwater in late January at sunrise on a clear day, so his first view was of flame-coloured mountains and forests heavy with snow and tinged with pink. There was no wind, and the ride in the small plane from Juneau was as smooth as sailing on a lake. Although in summer there was a boat every week, in winter flying was the only way in. Stillwater was as remote as any island.

They touched down earlier than the schedule and there was no one to meet him. The pilot lifted his bags down onto the runway, then got back into the plane and took off. Mark watched it until it flew away over the horizon. It was very cold standing there, and brilliantly clear. No noise, not even birdsong. The runway and a couple of huts and one road running off into the woods. A backdrop of mountain. The blinding light reflected from the ice, and sharp black shadows.

In 2003, the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain shortlisted Ann Cleeves for their "Dagger in the Library" award. Sponsored by the Random House Group, the award is intended to honor the author whose body of work has given most pleasure to readers, and is judged by librarians. It's easy to see why Ms. Cleeves was chosen for the list. Her vivid sense of place has a way of drawing readers into her work.

A dog barked and a woman bundled in a parka that made her look as fat as she was tall came out of the closest hut.

"Hi there." The dog had followed her and was dancing around her legs. "You're the new teacher." Close to, he saw she was middle-aged but striking. Red hair under the hood, a wide Cheshire-cat mouth.

"Yes," he said, aware of how English his voice was, thought even that one word sounded clipped and pompous. "Mark. Mark Arden."

"Well, hi, Mark. Pleased to meet you. Sally Ann Larson. My daughter's in eleventh grade. Let's go into my office and I'll get you some coffee then phone around and find out what's happened to your ride. Welcome to Alaska."

He met Sally Ann's daughter the next day in school. She was sit-

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ting in the front row in the class for the older students. The school took children from kindergarten through high school. There were forty of them altogether, three full-time teachers. Mark was an extra, part of a cultural exchange program. Usually he taught in an inner-city comprehensive in Newcastle, not very far from the suburb where he'd been brought up. He was twenty-six and needed a challenge. There'd recently been a messy separation from the girlfriend he'd had since college.

Beth Larson was sixteen, blond, and freckled, though as she stood to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, her feet apart, her hand on her heart, she looked so earnest that he thought she seemed younger. She had the same wide mouth as her mother.

As they sat down, he saw a moose in the schoolyard, grazing leaves from a nearby tree. It shook its head and the loose skin, which hung like a collar round its neck, moved too. The kids took no notice.

He asked them to introduce themselves in a piece of writing, "as if you were introducing the characters in a story." When they read out their work, he thought how different they were from the students he'd taught at home. One boy boasted about his skill with tractors, another described a summer fishing trip. Beth placed herself in the kitchen at home helping her mother bake for her father's birthday party. *He works most of the week in Anchorage,* she wrote, *so it's always special when he comes home.*

Mark thought it was as if he'd gone back in time. These children seemed to belong to his grandparents' generation. In some respects, however, the settlement's philosophy was surprisingly contemporary, liberal. He'd expected a backward community. Redneck. Hunting and shooting and isolationist. But many of the residents of Stillwater had moved there from the city because they were looking for a better way of living. They were idealists who'd cleared a patch in the forest and built a house out of logs for themselves and their families. They cared about their community and their environment. In the dark winter evenings they attended book groups and nature groups. They watched arty films in the school hall and put on plays. They didn't bother much with the television because the reception was poor, and anyway most of it was trash, but many did listen to the World Service on the BBC.

In the summer, he supposed it would be different. Then tourists came to camp in the national park and took boat trips into the bay to see the wildlife. The hotel would open again. But in the dark nights of winter, the people of Stillwater made their own entertainment.

Mark lived with Jerry Brown, a young man from Seattle who worked as a ranger in the national park. They shared a little house that was reached by a track through the trees. It had a porch looking over a bit of cleared meadow to a frozen stream. Jerry had moved to the community two years before and adored it.

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He said it was the only ethical way to live. He had a share in the Larsons' cow and took his turn at milking her. He led the conservation group. At home he was relaxed and friendly. He liked to drink beer and smoke a little dope, play very loud rock music. After all, he said, there was no one to disturb. Only the bears, and it was probably a good thing to discourage them. He seemed to Mark to be as naive and friendly as the children.

Mark walked to and from school, unless there was heavy snow. He enjoyed the exercise, the sting of the cold against his face and in his lungs. One afternoon he walked home and stopped by the jetty to look over the bay and watch the setting sun on the glacier. Cormorants stood on the wooden railing. The lights were coming on in the scattered homesteads on the opposite shore. Despite the cold, he must have stood there longer than he'd realised, because when he turned away from the view to continue, he saw it was almost dark. There were stars and a moon like a thin, tilted smile. Someone was walking down the straight road towards him. It was Beth Larson. She stood beside him, looked out at the jetty.

"We swim from there in the summer."

He felt uncomfortable being there with her. She was standing very close, whispering almost into his ear.

"It must be cold." He knew he sounded ridiculous and stamped his feet to cover his embarrassment. The temperature had dropped as the light went.

"Sometimes we go skinny-dipping . . ."

He imagined her in the summer sunshine, with her gold hair and gold skin, flashing like a fish through the water.

"You should get home," he said. "Your mother will be expecting you."

"She's visiting Mary Slater. You know how they talk. She won't be home for an hour. The house is empty. Come back. You could help me with my schoolwork." Though her voice made it clear that wasn't at all what she had in mind.

He actually considered it for a moment. He wondered later what had stopped him and decided it had nothing to do with ethics. A fear of being caught.

"No," he said. "I don't think that's a terribly good idea."

"You will," she said. "By the end of the winter when the boredom's set in, you'll be begging me by then. Only I might have changed my mind."

Then she ran off, her boots making only a rustling sound in the new snow. She disappeared into the darkness and he could make himself believe that the encounter had been a figment of his imagination. Back at the house, Jerry was caring for an injured surf bird he'd picked up from the shore. He had put it in a cardboard box and was feeding it pilchards from a tin. Mark would have

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liked to ask his advice about Beth Larson, but he was engrossed in his task and the moment never seemed to arise. Although Mark's students in Newcastle had been precocious, none of them had propositioned him, and he told himself he must have misinterpreted what had occurred.

That night he dreamed of Beth Larson. In the dream it was summer and he was swimming with her. She rose out of the bay, pulling herself up onto the jetty, and water dripped from her hair and ran over her body. He was about to reach out and touch her when he woke. In class the next day, she was sitting in the front as usual, serious and polite. He found it hard not to look at her, to remember that she had been available to him. He lost himself in daydreams.

The following weekend it was Valentine's Day and the whole community came together for a pooled supper and party. All the adults, at least. The kids weren't invited. The food was supposed to have an erotic theme and they'd had fun with hot dogs and mounds of rice curved like breasts and strangely shaped fruit and vegetables. All very innocent, no doubt, but Mark felt uneasy. The evening wasn't what he'd expected. He had thought these people would lead simple and unsophisticated lives, had imagined himself even as a missionary from the civilized world. But even though they wore jeans and hand-knitted sweaters and thick woollen socks, they talked about artists and writers who were only names to him. They made *him* feel like the country cousin, gauche and uneducated.

It didn't help that he found it hard to concentrate on the conversation. They were talking about a student who'd drowned in a boating accident. It was almost exactly a year since his death. The water had been so cold, they said, that he'd had no chance to survive. The shock would have killed him in seconds. Jerry, who was there too, made little effort to join in. He sat on the floor, leaning against the wall, a can of beer in his hand, watching them. Even in this setting he was a scientist. Mark did try to take part in the discussion, but the party was being held in the Larson house and he was distracted. He imagined Beth upstairs in her room. When the heating pipes gurgled, he pictured her taking a shower, the water trickling over her shoulders into the tub. There was no water pressure in any of the houses in Stillwater, so it would dribble slowly, across her belly and between her legs. Finally he made his apologies and left. Jerry offered to drive him, but Mark said he preferred to walk.

Outside, the cold took his breath away and he stood for a moment gasping, snorting out a white vapour through his nose. The stars were hidden by cloud and there were occasional flurries of snow. The lights from the house saw him through the trees to the road and then he switched on his flashlight. There was no sound except for the squeaking of his feet on the compacted snow, and that seemed very far away because of the fur hat pulled over

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his ears. He walked on, past the school and the gas station. Everywhere was in darkness. He was approaching the turnoff, the track that led to Jerry's house, when he heard the sound behind him, a roar that made him think of an avalanche or water released from a dam. Here, surrounded by trees, it didn't occur to him in that first second that the noise might be man-made.

Then he realised that it was the sound of an engine being revved very hard, revved to screaming point. Headlights flashed through the trees. In the dual beams he saw that it was snowing more heavily now. He jumped off the track into the trees just in time as a white pickup screeched past. He had stepped into a drift and the snow had gone over his boots and inside his socks. He was climbing out when the pitch of the engine changed and the headlights were turned again towards him. The truck only paused for a moment, then roared back down the road the way it had come, spraying loose snow from the wheels, sliding when the driver touched the brakes to round a corner. Mark could not tell whether or not he'd been seen. He had the ridiculous thought that he might have been a target.

At school on Monday, he called Dan Slater back after class. The Slaters were the only family in the community to have a white pickup, and the parents had been at the Valentine party. Outside, the other kids were standing around in the yard. That was unusual. It was too cold, even in daylight, just to hang out. Their presence unnerved Mark, though they couldn't possibly hear what he was saying. Dan was fourteen, very young for his age. He had problems with simple reading and writing. At home they would have said he had special needs.

"Were you driving your father's truck on Saturday night?"

Dan blinked, looked out of the window, stared at the ceiling.

"Sure," he said. "He lets me."

"You were driving very fast. You could have hurt yourself."

Outside the kids seemed to lose interest. They were starting to drift away. Mark felt more confident. He'd worked with dozens of students like Dan. He spoke gently. "Weren't you scared, driving like that? What made you do it? It wasn't a race."

"Not a race, no. Sometimes we race. But not last time."

"What then?"

"It was a game."

"What sort of game?"

"I guess it was a dare."

"Who dared you, Dan?"

But Dan wasn't prepared to talk any more. He pulled the strange, little-boy faces he made when he was concentrating in class, shuffled his feet, and stared out of the window. Finally, Mark let him go.

When Mark got home Beth was waiting for him. They never

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locked the door and she was inside the kitchen, sitting on the rocker in front of the stove, moving backwards and forwards. He'd been surprised to see smoke coming from the chimney as he'd approached, had thought Jerry must be back earlier than usual from work. She'd taken off her boots and her outdoor clothes, put a cassette into the recorder. When he opened the door, she stood up. She'd changed from the clothes she'd been wearing in school. Her sweater had a slash neck and was very tight. Her jeans could have been sprayed on.

"I thought I'd give you a second chance," she said. "I've seen the way you've been looking at me in class."

He stooped to unlace his boots. He knew he should make a lighthearted remark and send her on her way. Nothing too heavy. He had to live here for the rest of the year. He couldn't afford to upset her or her parents. But he was flattered, too. Excited. She walked towards him, moving her hips in time with the music, and she grinned, thinking, in his moment of indecision, that she had him hooked.

"Is this a dare, too?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Like Dan stealing his father's pickup and racing around the tracks."

She didn't answer.

"You do know Dan could have killed himself?"

She began to struggle into her coat. Although the grin seemed fixed to her face, there were tears on her cheeks. She tried to push past him, but he stood with his back against the door, pressing it shut. He took her by the shoulders, felt the bones under her thick coat, remembered other bones, another woman. He whispered into her ear, as she had whispered to him on the jetty, and his voice was seductive, too. "Just how far would you have been prepared to go, Beth? What exactly did they dare you to do?"

"Nothing," she said. "It was just a game." She scrambled out of his grasp and he let her go, feeling suddenly ashamed. The last of the sun caught her hair as she ran away down the track.

That night he dreamed of her again. In the morning her school desk was empty.

"Does anyone know where Beth is today?" he said, looking around the classroom. They stared back at him, challenging him to ask more. Whatever game was being played, they were all in on it.

"Her mother phoned in to say she's sick." It was Peter, the boy who knew about tractors. He was thickset and sullen and Mark had come to the conclusion that he knew little about anything else.

"Who told you that?"

Peter shrugged, not caring whether or not he was believed.

While the children were eating their lunch, Mark went to the Larson house. Sally Ann would be working in the booking office on

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the airstrip and Beth's father was in Anchorage. On his way there, he wondered why he was going. Was he looking for an excuse to see Beth on her own? He decided he was worried about her, though what on earth did he think could have happened to the girl?

He found her outside. She was in an open-sided barn splitting logs with an axe. Mark watched her from the yard. The axe was heavy, and she struggled to lift it, but her aim was exact and the blow was powerful. He thought how strong she must be, stronger than him. The wood split with one stroke and the splinters scattered, bouncing on the concrete floor. He could smell the resin from where he stood.

"I thought you were sick," he said. He waited until she was resting. He didn't want to scare her while she had the axe in the air. It would have been easy to cause an accident.

She didn't bother replying.

"Tell me about these games," he said.

"Why?" Her voice was bitter. "Do you want to play, too?"

"I want to understand."

"It's winter," she said. "Boring. We have to do something."

"It has to stop. Someone will get hurt. Tell them. If it doesn't stop, I go to the principal. And to your parents."

She turned angrily to face him, allowing the axe to crash to the floor.

"People have already been hurt," she said. "They won't stop."

But the next day she was back in school and he thought he'd handled the situation well. She'd have passed on the message to her friends. There would be no more foolishness.

He stayed at school late that evening for a staff meeting, and then to prepare a lesson for the following day. He was the last to leave the building, and it was already dark, though there was enough of a moon for him to follow the road. Past the gas station, Jerry's was the only house. There had been a slight thaw and he'd been aware all day of the sound of melting snow dripping from roofs and trees. Now it had started to freeze again, but he felt as if he was being followed by the same persistent sound. He stopped once and still it seemed to be there, coming from the trees on either side of the road. When he shone his torch, there were strings of icicles on each branch, quite frozen. It began to unnerve him and he wondered if it wasn't water after all, but the scratching of animals in the forest. There were brown bears. Everyone had stories about them, stealing food from outhouses, staring in through windows. They were only dangerous, people said, if they were cornered. He had never quite believed that. He walked more quickly. The sounds came nearer, gathering around him, closing him in.

Close to the turnoff to Jerry's house, panic made him stumble. As he pulled himself to his feet, he swung the torch behind him

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and saw two figures on the road. They were wrapped in coats and hoods so he couldn't tell who they were. Each had a stave in one hand, a piece of wood as thick and solid as Beth's axe handle. They banged the sticks in rhythm on the frozen path.

"Hi!" he called, relieved at first to have company. "Who is it?" But before he had finished speaking he realised that they weren't there to help him. He turned to continue on his way, but another moving shape had appeared on the road ahead of him, blocking his path. For a moment the scarf he was wearing slipped and Mark recognised Peter, the tractor driver.

More figures approached, moving through the forest. He circled, shining the torch crazily around him, catching glimpses of them, hooded like ghosts. The noise they made wasn't the natural sound of footsteps or crackling undergrowth. Each held a stick that he knocked against tree trunk or branch, disturbing the snow lying there and shattering icicles. It formed a strange percussion, at once hollow and brittle, that grew louder and louder. Mark jumped from the road into the trees and started running, sucking in the icy air in huge, howling gasps.

Roots tangled about his legs. The ground was uneven. There were frozen pools and outcrops of rock. Branches whipped into his face and upper body. And always he was aware of the noise around him and behind him. At last, when he was too exhausted to continue, he curled into a ball behind a pile of dead undergrowth. His muscles twitched from the exertion and he was still wheezing, but he forced himself to stay silent. He listened.

The dull thud of wood against bark had stopped. There were footsteps, but they seemed to be dying away. Desultory scraps of conversation grew more distant. Someone laughed. It seemed that the game was over. It was too cold and uncomfortable for them. They'd had their amusement. They'd go home to a wholesome supper, an evening of television or computer games. And in the morning they'd sit at their desks daring him to speak of what had happened. He'd overreacted, of course, which was just what they'd wanted. He'd made a fool of himself. He had believed that they meant to hurt him. He wasn't sure he could forgive them. Especially, he thought, Beth had betrayed him. She would have to pay for his humiliation.

Although it had seemed as if he'd been running for miles, he saw, when he could think more clearly, that he wasn't far from home. There was a faint light at the end of a clearing that must be their house. If he hadn't panicked, he could easily have made it back to safety before the children caught up to him. Jerry would be cooking. He'd promised potato pancakes with applesauce. It was the night, Mark thought, to open that bottle of Scotch he'd brought with him. What a sight he must look, all scratched and bruised. He began rehearsing a story of the incident in his head.

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How could he explain it? As a joke at his own expense, perhaps. The rookie Brit teacher spooked by a bunch of kids.

They were all waiting for him in the house. He didn't realize until he'd pushed open the door, and by then it was too late. Peter came around behind him and wedged it shut. They were seated on the floor around the walls, the sticks and baseball bats propped beside them. They had all kept very quiet, like the guests at a surprise party. He wondered if there had been the same nervous giggling. Now nobody laughed. They looked up at him and stared.

"Come on, kids," he said. "This is a joke, right?"

"Not a joke," Beth replied sternly. "A dare."

"You should go. Jerry will be here any minute."

"I'm here already," Jerry said. He slipped out from the bedroom. He looked as he always did when he got in from work. Relaxed and gentle. He wore a plaid shirt and jeans and held a can of beer in his hand. "It's my dare. I mean, I get bored in winter, too."

"You dared them to frighten me off?"

"Oh no," he said. "They dared me. To get rid of you. Without too much fuss. Before you could tell anyone about our games." He looked around at the staring children. "What'll it be, guys? A boating accident like last time? Or something more imaginative?"

The children picked up the sticks and began to batter them, the same rhythm over and over again, against the wooden floor. ●

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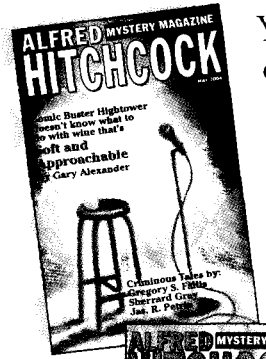

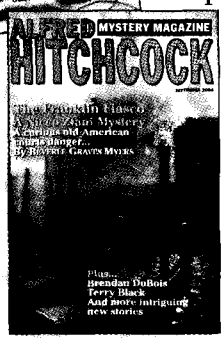

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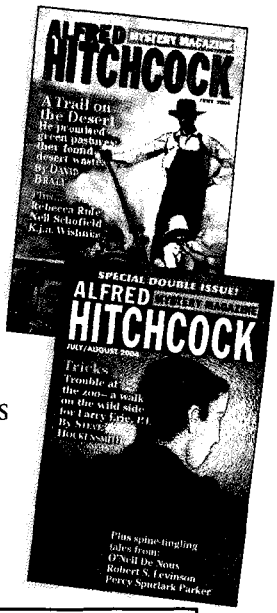

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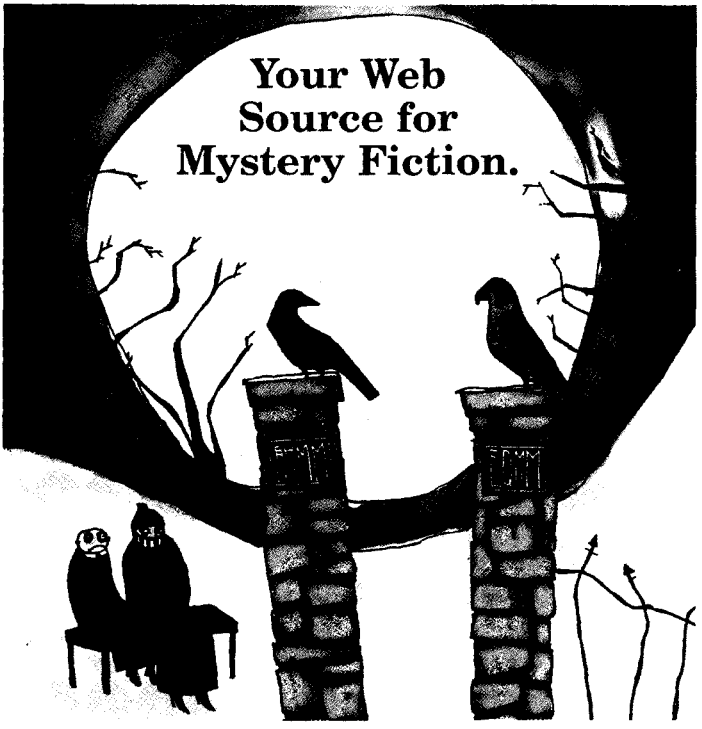

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